**Du Kartus**

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# Du Kartus

by MavisDaines

Summary

Du Kartus. The Lithuanian word for twice.

Perhaps Hannibal can get it right the second time.

# Chapter One

There's a strange sense of anticipation humming in the air.

Hannibal glances over at Will. The man is currently slumped against the window of the passenger seat, warm breath fogging up the glass. A steady torrent of rain pelts against the windshield, turning the road into a misty sea of shimmering black.

Hannibal allows himself to trace the outline of Will's form with his eyes. He starts with Will's mussed chocolate curls, flattened on one side by the window. Hannibal gently caresses the shape of Will's face, the sharp cut of his jaw, the scruff of his untrimmed beard, the way his pink lips are slightly parted with each inhale and exhale. His chest rises and falls with every stuttered breath. Will's torso, gaunt and hollowed-out, is covered by a thin navy sweater and a rather hideous brown jacket. Hannibal can smell Will's fever. The scent of it fills the small space of the Bentley. The fevered sweetness has come to be as heady a scent to Hannibal as that of freshly spilled blood or a fine vintage wine.

Hannibal sighs and turns to face the road once more. It's another six hours until they reach Minnesota; it will do neither of them any good if he spends the entire drive staring at Will rather than focusing on the path before him.

They only make one more stop before reaching the Hobbs' residence. It's at a rather abysmal service station outside of Madison, Wisconsin. Upon seeing the state of the restrooms, Hannibal asks for the cashier's business card, unsurprised when the elderly woman—who reeks of chewing tobacco and stale sweat—responds that she owns no such thing. Hannibal contents himself with writing down the address of the station for further perusal.

Will remains asleep the entire time, not even waking when Hannibal has to suddenly brake after a large semi truck runs a red light. It seems a miracle they ever reach Minnesota—not that Hannibal believes in things such as miracles. No, any good thing that has happened in his life has come from either his own hand or the hand of another. Miracles are stories for children and sheep; Hannibal is neither.

"Hello?" Will mumbles, eyes still closed. The scent of his fever spikes. Sharpens. Hannibal itches to pry open Will's brain, to see the inflammation and all the chaos it causes for himself. Such a delectable thing, to set something so beautiful on fire.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs. "Will."

"Yes," Will responds. His voice is rough from disuse.

"We're here."

Will's bleary eyes finally crack open. He lifts his head from off the window, wincing at the sudden change in position after hours in the same uncomfortable spot. Hannibal waits until Will is outside of the car before locking the doors and following Will into the deserted house.

Will removes the neon yellow police tape and opens the sliding glass door. When they walk inside of the basement, Will's head tilts for a moment, as if some invisible voice is whispering words into his ear that only he is privy to. He stops. Turns. Stares at Hannibal with blazing eyes.

"Are we going to re-enact the crime?" Will asks.

Hannibal suppresses a smile. How clever his mongoose is. "If it would help you."

"It may come to that," Will says.

They climb up the stairs and enter the kitchen. Hannibal turns to look at the blood stain etched on the floor. Pride rises up in him like a wave as he surveys the physical proof of his deceit. So expertly done that not even the FBI's most talented profiler can identify it as false. Granted, Will's brain is simmering in fever and inflamed with encephalitis, but still.

Hannibal manages to school his expression into one of appropriate horror as he watches Will bow his head in agony. "It's as if Abigail was supposed to die in this kitchen," Hannibal says. "Nothing we did was able to change that."

"Her throat was cut. She lost great gouts of blood, and there's an unmistakable arterial spray —" Will's voice stops, choking on the words.

Hannibal preens. Will is reading the scene Hannibal has set for him like a person reading braille, Will's sharp gaze like fingertips picking apart the individual dots and dashes and then turning them into sentences in his mind.

"They haven't found her body," Hannibal says.

Will scoffs. His scent sours with fear. With disbelief. "Just the one piece."

A strange surge of arousal floods Hannibal as he imagines shoving the tube down Will's throat, watching the man choke as Hannibal forced Abigail's ear into his stomach.

"If you were in Garret Jacob Hobbs' frame of mind when you killed her, they may never find her body."

"Cause I honored every part of her?"

Now it is Hannibal's turn to scoff—though he does so inwardly, the sound of it hidden far beneath his person suit. As if a pig can be honored. "Perhaps you didn't come here looking for a killer. Perhaps you came here to find yourself. You killed a man in this very room."

Will shakes his head. "I stared at Hobbs and the space opposite me assumed the shape of a man filled with dark and swarming flies. And then I scattered them."

"At a time when other men first see and fear their isolation, yours has become understandable to you. You are alone because you are unique." A sentiment that Hannibal understands far too well.

The scent of Will changes. Darkens. Morphs into something dangerous—something delicious. “I’m as alone as you are.”

Will sees too much. It is the reason they are here, now, arguing over Hannibal’s crimes as Will’s brain boils inside of his head. “If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you’d become someone other than yourself.”

Will continues to shake. His skin is deathly white save for the fevered flush of his cheeks. Hannibal is reminded of a snake before molting, its outermost layer of scales turning translucent before shedding away. Is this Will’s becoming? Will he too shed away his layer of self-righteous morals and indignation to become something greater?

Something like Hannibal?

*Please*, Hannibal wishes to beg. He will do no such thing, of course. Hannibal has never begged for anything in his life, not even when threatened with the death of his entire family—not even when Mischa was fed to him in a bowl of stew, her baby teeth resting against the bottom of the ceramic dish. He refuses to do so now, despite the urge. Will may never become. May never reach his full potential. Though Hannibal guides him along, Will must emerge from the chrysalis alone.

“I know who I am.” Will’s teeth are gritted. Jaw clenched tight. A bead of sweat rolls down the side of his head. “I’m not so sure I know who you are anymore. But I am certain one of us killed Abigail.”

Will raises his gun and points it at Hannibal. A thrill goes down Hannibal's spine, though he is not afraid. Curious, yes, but not scared.

“Are you a killer, Will? You. Right now. This man in front of me. Is this who you really are?” Hannibal aches for Will to accept this part of himself. He aches so badly that even for Will to murder Hannibal would be a gift, an end Hannibal would gladly receive if it was the final stumbling block to hurdle in Will’s emergence.

That being said, Hannibal has no plans to die today.

Will’s eyes are black as he says, “You called here that morning. Abigail knew. You kept her secrets until she found out some of yours.”

Hannibal eyes the gun in Will’s hand. The way his knuckles turn white as they clench the leather grip. “You said it felt good to kill Garret Jacob Hobbs, Will. Would it feel good to kill me now?”

“Garret Jacob Hobbs was a murderer. Are you a murderer, Dr. Lecter?”

Ah, his cunning boy. Unfortunately, Hannibal does not plan on confessing. Not today, at least. Now is not the time.

“What reason would I have?”

“You have no traceable motive, which is why you were so hard to see.” Will’s voice is nearly a whisper. “You were just curious what I would do. Someone like me. Someone who thinks how I think. Wind him up and watch him go. Apparently, Dr. Lecter, this is how I go.”

And then Will, the man that Hannibal has never been able to fully predict, the man who barreled his way into Hannibal’s life with cheap flannel and biting sarcasm and a mind far too sharp—far too dangerous, able to pierce through Hannibal’s carefully-crafted person suit if and when given the chance—does something that Hannibal could never have imagined in his worst nightmare.

He turns the gun towards himself.

“Will,” Hannibal cautions. His heart jumps inside of his chest. This…was not what he had planned. What he had predicted. Hannibal had predicated Will’s anger, yes. His self-righteous fury. His fear and betrayal when he realized what Hannibal had done. His hatred for Hannibal and the Ripper.

Hannibal had not planned for that hatred to turn inwards.

“You are sick,” Hannibal tries to reason. “Your fever is twisting your mind, warping your sense of self until every moving shadow is a monster. There are no monsters here, just you and me.”

Will is trembling. Shaking. Sweat pours from his forehead and trickles into the collar of his shirt, dampening the material so that it sticks to his pale neck like a second skin.

“Will,” Hannibal repeats. The barrel of the gun is pressed firmly against Will’s temple. It does not tremble, surprisingly steady despite the tremors running through the rest of Will’s body. “Please. Lower the gun. Point it at me if you must. Do not let this madness burn inside you any longer. It will consume you if you let it.”

Will lets out a strangled laugh. It sounds more like a sob. His glasses slip to the end of his nose, encouraged by the moisture clinging to his skin. Hannibal has the strangest urge to reach up, delicately push Will’s glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. To caress Will’s sweat-slick cheekbone and murmur words of encouragement into his ear until his mind shatters at last.

“Consume me? *Consume* me? I am not the one doing the consuming, Dr. Lecter. Not now. You can lie to Alana and Jack, but I see you. You cannot hide your antlers from me.”

Antlers? Hannibal’s curiosity, which is never far from the surface around Will, once again rises to the forefront of his mind. “What do you see, Will?”

“I see you.”

Hannibal takes a single step forward. One hand rests, lightly, inside of the pocket of his trousers. The other lays flat on one of the countertops lining the kitchen. Hannibal can feel the cheap linoleum slide beneath his fingertips. A splintered piece catches against his skin, tugs at the pads of his thumb and pointer finger.

“Will,” Hannibal says again. One last plea. A strange emotion rises up inside of Hannibal’s chest. It causes his heart to pound, his eyes to dilate, his pulse to race beneath his skin like some writhing, trapped beast desperate to break free.

Fear.

Hannibal is afraid.

“This is how I go,” Will whispers. His eyes fall shut, black lashes casting a delicate shadow across the pale skin of his face.

In the stretch of a heartbeat, Will pulls the trigger on the gun.

In an instant, the tiled floor is covered with fresh blood and splattered brain. Will’s body slumps to the ground, the gun falling as Will’s slack hand releases the weapon. Hannibal can hear the clack of metal against tile, can smell the sweet, coppery scent of Will’s life as it drains from his body, can see Will’s lifeless eyes as they stare, unseeing, at the ceiling. All of this Hannibal experiences, yet his mind refuses to process what just occurred. Refuses to accept the reality that Will Graham, the most infuriating, intriguing, intelligent (perfect) man that Hannibal has ever had the pleasure of meeting is now dead.

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice is broken. It comes out like a croak, an echo of his broken heart.

Will’s lifeless body mocks him, giving one last final twitch, one last flutter of toes and fingers as Will’s eyelids flicker shut.

Hannibal drops to the ground. He does not register the pain in his knees, nor the sound of his choked-out cries as they echo in the empty room.

“Please,” he pleads.

His begging falls on deaf ears.

“Come back. I…I’m sorry. So, so *sorry* Will.”

In the distance, the sound of sirens. Slamming doors and tromping boots. Hannibal smells Agent Crawford before he sees him.

Jack finds Hannibal like this, body curled over Will’s, his surgeon’s hands—known for their steadiness in even the most high-stress situations—trembling as they caress the hole in the side of Will’s head.

“Dr. Lecter. Fuck. Somebody call backup! And I want an ambulance for Lecter! Zeller, you —”

The shouted words fade from Hannibal’s mind. Slip through his ears like water falling over a rough stone. Hannibal stares at Will’s pale, chapped lips and imagines the shape of them against his own. Wonders why those he loves always end up cold and broken.

“Lecter, I need you to get up. Will’s body has to be taken in. Beverly’s already agreed to perform the autopsy. If you could just…”

Hannibal sways as he stands. His eyes trace over the scruff on Will’s jaw, sight glazing over with a fresh bout of tears as he realizes that a piece of Will’s brain—his infinitely precious mind—has landed among the coarse, untrimmed hair.

Hannibal does not remember leaving the Hobbs’ residence. He does not remember being led to the back of an ambulance, does not remember the inept fumblings of a too-young EMT as they search him for any signs of trauma or injury.

They will find none. The damage is inside.

And Hannibal fears it is fatal.

Alana tries to comfort him when he is flown into Quantico for questioning.

“I’m so sorry,” she repeats again and again as soon as he lands on the tarmac. The air is cooler in Baltimore, the slight tang from the sea providing a hint of salt inside of his nostrils. Alana’s face is flushed, eyes red-rimmed, black hair a mess from running her fingers through the long, tangled strands. “We had no idea—that is, if we suspected that Will would… would…”

She cannot finish the sentence. Hannibal’s brain is too lost as it swims in its own personal brand of hell to help her find the words.

The debriefing is…brief. Succinct. Jack asks boring, predictable questions. Hannibal gets no satisfaction in weaving together the final threads of his web to ensnare Will. Without Will here—without Will *alive*—it is all for nothing. As useful as a piece of snapped twine that’s been battered in the wind. Hannibal answers the questions. He does not have to fake his shock or distress at witnessing Will’s suicide. Jack lets him go after thirty minutes with a gruff command to “take some time.”

Hannibal arrives home and walks inside with a false sense of calm. *Shock,* his mind supplies. He is going into shock. Everything seems hazy. His footsteps echo in the empty rooms as he hangs his coat by the front door and walks through the kitchen and up the stairs to his bedroom. It seems colder, somehow. The blue and brown decor he had found comfort in for so many years no longer provides a sense of safety. Everything is so…still. Lifeless.

He forces himself to take a shower. There are droplets of blood and brain matter dried into the cuffs of his jacket. Stale sweat and saliva sit beneath the skin of his nails. Even his face has not been spared, dried blood flecking across his cheekbones like macabre freckles. Hannibal itches to scrub them off.

He keeps his face clear of the water when he showers.

It is early evening by the time Hannibal finally lays down to sleep. His curtains are closed, but a sliver of the brilliant sunset manages to worm its way inside. Hannibal’s expression is

perfectly neutral as he climbs up off of the bed and walks over to the window, tying the curtains together to block out the bright orange light.

In the morning, Hannibal cancels all of his appointments for the following week. He is being far too generous with himself—as if a mere week is enough time to heal from this sort of wound—but he cannot make himself strike out any additional names in his book. If he does, then the loss will seem more real, and Hannibal is surviving on his shock, treading the waters of consciousness and clinging tight to the lifeboat of denial.

Dr. Du Maurier is the first place he goes.

"Hannibal," she greets as soon as he knocks on the door. "I was wondering when I would see you again. I didn't expect it to be quite so soon."

Hannibal has no reply for this. He tightens the seams of his person suit and gracefully steps into Bedelia's home, heading straight for his familiar chair.

"Wine?" she asks.

"No." Hannibal is proud of how steady his voice comes out. How in control it seems, when Hannibal feels anything but. "Thank you."

"Of course." Bedelia slides into the seat opposite his. She crosses her delicate ankles, purses her lips. "The last time we were here, we spoke of loss. Of failure. Another life has impacted yours, Hannibal. Burdens placed on top of one another have a habit of tumbling down."

"I am not tumbling. I am…floating. Riding the waves of refutation until I am ready to dip into the waters of what occurred."

"This is such a place to dip. Grieving should not be done alone. I encourage you to stop floating and let yourself sink."

Hannibal cannot. Every time he closes his eyes, every time he breathes, every time he so much as *blinks,* the sight of Will's shattered cranium comes crashing into his mind.

"I…perhaps another time."

Bedelia tilts her head, stares at Hannibal for a moment before nodding and moving on to a different topic of conversation. Hannibal responds to every question or comment in an appropriate manner. When their hour has come to a close, Hannibal still feels as though he is floating, though now he can say he has at least *tried* to process the grief.

The rest of the week passes in a similar state of shock. Alana comes to check on him, as does Jack. The sight of them hurts—the memories both of them invoke too painful to bear for even a moment. Hannibal floats, and rests, and when the tide of grief finally pulls him under, he does not surface.

"I'm sorry," Hannibal whispers.

He stares at the photograph of Mischa, the only relic left of his sister. She stares at him from a grainy polaroid, blonde hair a blur as she smiles at the camera. Hannibal aches as he traces her features for a final time. His hand is steady, his finger firm as it presses against the space where her heart was—where Hannibal consumed her, took her inside of himself to keep her safe when he could not do so before.

There's a boning knife in Hannibal's kitchen with a handle made of ivory. The deadly point can dig into joints or between ribs, and the blade is sharp enough to slice pieces of meat thinner than a sheet of paper.

Hannibal holds the knife now, stares at his reflection in the silver blade.

A tear drops, falls. It lands on the metal before sliding to the floor. Hannibal imagines, for a moment, that Will is standing beside him. It's an easy task; Hannibal has imagined such a thing many times even before his passing, when Will was away on a case or avoiding social interaction with anyone other than his four-legged companions. Hannibal can almost smell the terrible aftershave, can hear the rasp of Will's deep voice, can feel the heat emanating from his body as he burns and burns.

"So this is it?" Will asks.

"It is," Hannibal says. He brings the blade up, rests it beneath the jut of his chin.

"I expected more. The end of the Chesapeake Ripper should be an explosion, not a free-fall into oblivion."

"There is no more Ripper, Will. He died with you. I died with you, that night in Minnesota. There is nothing left for me here. You were…you were everything to me."

"Is that why you let me burn?" Will snorts. "Some kind of love you have, Dr. Lecter."

"I did not know how to love you," Hannibal replies. He turns to face Will, enamored with the man's bright blue eyes. He remembers so clearly the first time they met. Will was snapping like a trapped dog, practically foaming at the mouth before storming out of Jack's office without a backwards glance.

It had been love at first sight.

"I'm sorry," Hannibal repeats.

Will reaches up, curves a hand around Hannibal's cheek. Hannibal leans into the touch. Will's calluses press against his skin like a kiss.

"I suppose I'll see you in the next life, then."

"I hope so," Hannibal says. "It would be no greater honor than to live and die by your side, Will."

Will quirks his lips. "So romantic. If you had courted me like that from the beginning, we might have had a shot."

Hannibal swallows. The blade presses tighter against his throat, cutting a thin ribbon of red into his skin.

Hannibal blinks. When he opens his eyes, Will is gone—never there in the first place. It's too much for Hannibal to bear. With a loud, keening cry, he rips the blade into his neck and slices open his carotid arteries, amazed at the gush of blood that shoots out onto the kitchen floor as he quickly drains himself dry.

Slumped against the cabinet, knife clenched in a blood-soaked grip, Hannibal hears the faint sound of Will's laughter.

It sounds like coming home.

# Chapter Two

It sounds like home.

In the distance, there is the chittering of birds. The faint rumblings of traffic, rare and sparse, that pass through a neighborhood as respectable as Chandler Square. Hannibal can even hear the humming of his air conditioning unit as it whirs to life.

Hannibal opens his eyes, immediately squinting as light filters through his window. Though pale, it increases with every passing second, dawn creeping into the room like smoke curling beneath a closed door.

It is not what Hannibal expected of the afterlife. Though, to be fair, he tried not to have any expectations at all. Why expect something that is impossible to predict or quantify? Hannibal enjoys the mental gymnastics that come with philosophy, but it had always seemed a waste to spend time worrying about what occurs after death when there was so much to focus on while living.

Hannibal sighs and gets up from bed. He walks to the windows and peers outside, surprised to see everything as it should be. There is no rising mist in the distance, no cemetery full of buried bodies, no swarm of ghosts and ghouls waiting to greet him now that he is awake. It looks as it always does; neatly-trimmed grass, a smattering of ornamental plants, and a well-maintained fence around the edges of his yard. Even the sky looks the same, a cacophony of colors bursting from the horizon as the sun begins its daily ascent.

Intrigued, Hannibal walks away from the curtains and goes to where he usually plugs in his phone and tablet. Both are sitting on his nightstand, fully charged. Hannibal picks up his phone and checks the date.

Monday, April 4th.

The day Hannibal met Will Graham for the first time.

Hannibal almost wants to laugh. Is this nature's way of punishing him? Forcing him to relive the day he fell in love so soon after witnessing Will's death? If Hannibal were the type to believe in karma, he supposes this would be a fitting fate for himself after everything that has occurred.

But what should he do?

Hannibal sighs, picks up his phone, and connects to the internet. There is nothing strange in the news, no signs or hints that Hannibal is now dead and in the afterlife. His tablet proves no different. Everything is exactly as Hannibal remembers from that specific day, down to the TattleCrime post of the Minnesota Shrike's latest victim.

Hannibal puts the tablet back on the charger and decides to go through his typical morning routine. Perhaps a hot shower and some freshly-ground coffee will help him come up with a

plan for his current predicament. After all, this might be some sort of test; Hannibal might be in purgatory, and his actions now will decide his eternal fate.

Hannibal cannot help but scoff at such a notion. Even now, even after his death, Hannibal still mocks the idea of being placed into a black-and-white prison like heaven or hell. Hannibal has always defied expectations. Why should his death be any different?

The shower is, like everything else, perfectly normal. All of Hannibal's soaps and toiletries are organized like usual. He scrubs himself down with his typical, perfunctory movements, enjoying the smell of his sandalwood and bergamot body wash. After his shower, Hannibal dresses in the outfit he wore the day he met Will all those months ago—if it was months. For all he knows, Hannibal had died thousands of years in the past and is only now regaining consciousness in this strange new world.

For breakfast, Hannibal makes a cup of coffee as well as a protein scramble in honor of Will. Hannibal will never forget Will's face as he took his first bite, the look of unexpected pleasure that crossed his perfectly-formed features. Just the thought causes a spike of arousal to run down Hannibal's spine, and he quickly finishes his breakfast before brushing his teeth, climbing into his Bentley, and heading to Quantico.

The drive over is so mind-numbingly mundane that Hannibal suspects for a moment he is actually in hell and this is to be his eternal punishment: monotony. It certainly seems a fitting punishment for someone like Hannibal. He almost wants to commend whoever concocted this type of torture for finding the one thing that Hannibal cannot abide by. Pain is an old friend. Disappointment and betrayal his cousins. But prosaic, day-to-day living? If this is what awaits him for the rest of time, Hannibal aches to take a knife to his throat all over again.

Hannibal's first interaction with another person since his death is also decidedly uninspiring. The front guards at Quantico ask for his I.D., then require him to empty his pockets and walk through a metal detector before directing him to Jack Crawford's office. Hannibal is handed a visitor's badge and a false smile on his way out.

Are the guards ghosts? Clones? Pieces of clay molded into the shape of humans and tasked with inhibiting Hannibal's personal hell for all of eternity?

Unsure, Hannibal gives each one a wan smile and pushes the button in the elevator to take him to the top floor of Quantico.

His heart begins to race. His palms get sweaty. As Hannibal gets nearer and nearer to the room where he met—where he will meet?—Will for the first time, Hannibal realizes that he is…anxious.

Whether this is a hallucination or punishment or some strange, end-of-life reminiscence, Hannibal plans to savor every second. Just a moment of seeing Will alive (whole, without a bullet wound shattering his skull into a smattering of separate pieces) would be enough to nourish Hannibal for a thousand years.

The elevator dings.

Hannibal clears his throat, straightens the lapels of his suit. He steps into the long hallway and walks to Jack Crawford's office, steadying himself with one last, fortifying breath before opening the door.

Jack and Will are already inside. Jack is standing behind his desk, arms spread and palms placed flat on the expensive wood. Will sits in front like a naughty schoolchild being lectured by their principal, his glasses perched just so on the end of his nose in order to avoid eye contact. Behind Jack's desk, a large cork board filled with images, maps, and pins is spread out like a buffet.

Hannibal pauses in the doorway, hand on the knob. He breathes in the scent of Will—alive, safe, *whole*—and cannot help the rush of tears that flood his eyes. They are quickly shoved down, buried beneath Hannibal's person suit, and he walks into the room with sure, confident steps until he it standing in front of the board, mindful of Will behind him as if the man were on fire and Hannibal's body made of ice (melting, always, beneath Will's burning presence).

Hannibal opens his mouth to speak, but the words get trapped, perched beneath his chin like an un-uttered scream. He clears his throat. Tries again.

"How many confessions?" he asks Jack, grateful he is able to remember the words of this particular script. He remembers every conversation he ever had with Will; every nanosecond of time spent around the infuriating (perfect) man is seared into Hannibal's brain like a brand, never to be removed, not even—it seems—in death.

"Twelve dozen last time I checked," Jack responds. He drones on about the case, all information Hannibal knows—all information he does not care about. There is only one thing in this room that matters, and Hannibal is tense with the anticipation of turning around and facing him once more.

Hannibal finally turns.

Will is…exactly as Hannibal remembers him.

A scowl drawn over his perfect pink lips. Glasses blocking any attempt to maintain eye contact. Chocolate curls scruffy and mussed, though not unwashed. His skin is pale, waxen, untouched by the sun despite the hours spent outside. Even his clothes are the same, rumpled flannel and a rather atrocious pair of trousers.

Hannibal immediately falls back in love.

"Tasteless," Will mutters as soon as Jack is finished speaking.

Hannibal swallows. He breathes. He flexes his hands at his sides, unable to do anything but follow the script—unable to mess up the one interaction that changed the entire trajectory of his life (for the better, even if it ended in his death).

"Do you have trouble with taste?" Hannibal asks. His voice is low, full of gravel. His heart pounds wildly inside of his chest as if desperate to burst from beneath his ribs and spit itself out onto the ugly gray carpet. Hannibal's trembling hands are quickly shoved into his

pockets. He takes a step towards Will and is suddenly overcome by the sight (the smell, the taste) of him. He immediately takes a step back.

Will scoffs and turns his head so that he is looking over Hannibal's shoulder rather than at his face. "My thoughts are not often tasty."

This particular song and dance is so achingly familiar that Hannibal feels he could repeat the conversation in his sleep—or in this case, his death. He has replayed these words, these movements over and over so many times in his head that to relive them now feels more like watching a performance of his favorite opera rather than participating in an actual conversation.

"Nor mine," Hannibal says. "No effective barriers."

Will and Hannibal continue their back and forth, Jack watching them from behind the desk the entire time, amused. When Will stands in a flurry and says, "Please don't psychoanalyze me. You won't like me when I'm psychoanalyzed," Hannibal physically *feels* himself falling more in love, so enamored with Will and his righteous indignation that he is surprised there is any room left in his body for his organs and bones.

"Maybe we shouldn't poke him like that doctor," Jack warns.

Hannibal's head is spinning. There's a lack of oxygen in the room—though if this is truly the afterlife, was there any oxygen at all to begin with? Does Hannibal even need to breathe? He tries holding his breath for a moment to see what happens; his lungs immediately begin to ache, and a feeling like fire spreads to every limb in his body after thirty seconds.

It would seem as though breathing is not optional here.

Hannibal leaves Jack's office more off-kilter than he entered it. He wants to follow Will, to track down his mongoose and beg him to never leave Hannibal's sight again. He wants to kill anyone who even attempts to look at Will, to stake his claim in such a way that no one and nothing will ever second-guess as to whom Will belongs. He wants—

But Hannibal cannot always get what he wants (loath as he is to admit such a thing). If this is truly the afterlife, and this entire day has been some sort of test, Hannibal wishes to pass the test merely for the fact that he rather hates to lose.

So Hannibal leaves Quantico. He goes back to his office and listens to the rest of his patients for the day—a rather trying affair as any words not spoken to Will are words *wasted* in his opinion. He retires home at his regular time and eats a delectable meal of roast rump from a particularly well-endowed cyclist. He tries to stay awake, to see if keeping his eyes open after such a strange day will make any difference, but it seems as though Hannibal is still human after all (a rather trying thought, but if he is human, than so is Will, and that means this could be more than a mere memory). Around midnight, his eyes finally flutter closed, and when he opens them again it is morning and his phone says the date is now Tuesday, April 5th.

Hannibal has a decision to make, then. This is where the script becomes something… regrettable. He does not regret killing Cassie Boyle the last time around—the girl was rude,

and her tableau provided Will with the perfect counterbalance in order to solve the Hobbs' case. That being said, Hannibal does regret the way he let Will burn. The way Will's mind, such a wondrous and precious commodity, dissolved into a river that melted from his body (quite literally, in the end, and Hannibal cannot help the shudder that runs down his spine as he remembers Will's prone, dead form on the floor of the Hobbs' residence).

No, this time Hannibal will do better. Not because this might be a test. Not because the fate of his soul might depend upon the outcome of his decisions. Not because he is suddenly a paragon of morality that always wishes to do right by his fellow man.

No, Hannibal is going to do better because Will *deserves* better.

Will deserves the world, no matter which (or what) world that may be.

And Hannibal intends to give it to him.

Almost as soon as Hannibal makes the decision, he feels…lighter, somehow. Knowing he is able to provide and care for Will is as sweet a victory—or sweeter, even—than pinning his crimes on the unsuspecting man. Hannibal calls Johns Hopkins Hospital and orders an MRI to be prepared. Hannibal's connections make it an easy string to pull; just one phone call, and Hannibal is able to have everything arranged.

The next morning, Hannibal prepares the rest of the cyclist into a protein scramble that he packs into a warming tote and slides over his shoulder.

Will's office at the FBI academy is…underwhelming to say the least. Four walls with no window, a rickety desk that looks one gust of air away from blowing over, and carpet the shade of old vomit. Hannibal grimaces at the sight of it, knocking on the trim around the doorway to alert Will of his presence.

"Dr. Lecter," Will says. He stands up from his chair, shoves his glasses further up his nose. "What are you doing here? Has there been a development with the Hobbs' case?"

Hannibal simply stares for a moment, content merely to look at Will. He wishes to savor every second in the man's presence, to absorb every molecule of Will's body and then mold it to his own. "I came bearing gifts. A protein scramble, actually. Jack mentioned you are often the first one to arrive and the last one to leave. I fear you are doing your body a disservice by treating it to the food that the cafeteria provides."

Will snorts and tugs on the sleeve of his jacket. "Bold of you to assume I am eating in the cafeteria at all."

Hannibal sighs, besotted, and slips the warming tote off of his shoulder. He sets it on Will's desk and unzips the top so that the smell of warm eggs and spiced sausage fills the room.

"I'm very careful about what I put into my body," Hannibal says. He takes out two plates, two forks, and two cloth napkins from the tote before finally getting out the protein scramble. As he is preparing the plates with food, he says, "I end up preparing most meals myself."

Hannibal removes a large thermos of coffee from his bag and pours him and Will each a steaming cup.

Will eyes the entire meal with caution. Perhaps even an air of disdain. He practically rolls his eyes when Hannibal hands him the cup, but he takes it nonetheless, so Hannibal considers the endeavor a success after all.

Hannibal sits in the seat opposite Will, a mimicry of their first meal together in an equally shoddy room—though that one in Minnesota rather than Maryland. Hannibal picks up his fork, stabs a steaming pile of eggs, and brings it to his mouth as if to show Will that the food has not, in fact, been poisoned.

Will sighs and slouches into his own chair. He grabs his fork with too much force and shoves a mouthful of scramble into his mouth without blowing, immediately wincing at the sudden heat. Hannibal smiles at him and watches with wonder as Will's features slacken and his pupils dilate.

"It's delicious," he mumbles, a compliment wrenched from his soul as though it were not consciously given. "Thank you."

Hannibal tilts his head, not trusting himself to speak under the sudden well of emotion that rises in him like a tide. He continues eating his food, and Will does the same. When they are both mostly finished, Hannibal asks, "Have you been having headaches, Will? I cannot help but notice the bottles of aspirin lining your desk. An otherwise peculiar choice of decor, though I cannot fault you considering the clientele you are forced to interact with on a day-to-day basis."

Will pauses with his fork halfway to his mouth and frowns. "Asking about my health already, doctor? If my mental state is not up for grabs then my physical surely must be."

"I am merely concerned," Hannibal says. "That is all."

"Your concern is noted. Just keep it professional."

Hannibal covers a cough and sets down his own fork. "Or we could socialize like adults," he replies. He stares at Will's face, eyes caressing each and every feature they find. "God forbid we become friendly."

Will's frown only deepens. He sets his fork onto his plate and pushes his unfinished meal into the center of the desk. "I don't find you that interesting."

"You will."

Hannibal begins clearing the desk, placing the used utensils and plates into the warming tote and sliding the tote onto the floor. "I have a rather keen sense of smell. I noticed it first when I was a young man. I was aware one of my teachers had stomach cancer even before he did."

Will rolls his eyes so that they are facing the ceiling. "A nice anecdote, doctor, but I fail to see how that relates to me. Are you trying to tell me that I have stomach cancer?"

“Encephalitis, actually.”

Will pauses. Stills. His entire body goes rigid before he finally, *finally* looks Hannibal in the eye for the first time since Hannibal woke again in this strange sort of afterlife. “What?”

“Encephalitis,” Hannibal repeats, lost in Will’s eyes. They are the most intriguing shade of blue, something mercurial that shifts between green and gray depending on Will’s mood. Right now, they are nearly electric, bright and sharp and *lovely*.

“And what does encephalitis smell like?” Will asks. His voice is low, so deep and rough that Hannibal has to lean forward in his seat just to hear it better.

“It has heat. A fevered sweetness. I wanted to be sure of my theory before confiding in you. I smelled it yesterday when we first met. If you would like, I have secured an MRI for you at Johns Hopkins. I was a surgeon there for some time, and most of the staff are happy to accommodate their schedules for a friend of mine.”

“A friend,” Will repeats.

“Yes.”

They stare at one another for an indeterminable amount of time. Hannibal breathes as deeply as possible through his nose without attracting attention. Will’s horrible aftershave is the first thing to hit his nostrils. Then the fevered sweetness, the sickness that twisted Will’s brain so badly that he…Hannibal stops that train of thought and continues sorting through the catalog of scents as they are presented to him. There’s the smell of dog, though that is something seen—through the copious amounts of dog hair on Will’s jacket and pants—as well as smelled. There’s freshly mowed grass, the scent of glacial water, the warmth of sun-kissed skin. And beneath all that is something that is purely Will, something musky and spicy and completely intoxicating.

“I think you should go,” Will says. He stands, abruptly, and points to the open door. “Now.”

Hannibal frowns and stands with much more grace. “I did not mean to offend, I simply—”

“Stuck your nose in a stranger’s business?” Will interrupts (and for anyone else this would be a one-way ticket to Hannibal’s dinner table, but from Will the interruption is simply endearing). “I don’t know you, doctor. I don’t trust you. And I don’t need you coming in here and…and…*smelling* me and claiming you know my body better than I know it myself. Goodbye.”

Hannibal tilts his head in a diminutive nod, places the tote bag over his shoulder, and walks to the doorway. There, he pauses and says, “If you change your mind, I’ve taken the liberty of placing my business card in your bag. Goodbye, Will.”

Hannibal leaves the academy with a heavy heart. Though he had not expected the meeting to go perfectly, he hadn’t expected it to go so…wrong, either. Will is just as obstinate and stubborn as always. If Hannibal is to help the poor man in curing his encephalitis—

Hannibal's mission, the only reason he feels he is reliving these specific months yet again—it seems he will need to take a more subtle tactic.

He calls the hospital and tells them to put the MRI on hold—for now. Hannibal is an expert manipulator, after all. He has high hopes he will get Will in for treatment sooner rather than later.

With that settled, Hannibal packs his kill suit, a rack of antlers, and a few tools into his Bentley before making the long drive to Minnesota; he has a tableau to prepare.

Cassie Boyle is as insufferable as he remembers. Whiny and arrogant and utterly satisfying to cut into. Hannibal relishes the scent of fresh blood, sweet and coppery. He places Cassie's lungs into a specially-prepared cooler, mounts her body (leaving a piece of shaved metal he plucked from Garrett Jacob Hobbs' work site in order to pin the murder back on him), and drives back to Baltimore feeling rather accomplished.

Jack Crawford is less than amused with Hannibal's offering.

"Get to Minnesota as fast as you can," he spits into the phone. Hannibal moves his cell from one shoulder to the other, already showered and dressed despite the earliness of the hour. "We have another body, and Will is…just get here."

"Of course. I will see you later today."

Hannibal hangs up with a smile on his face and finishes packing his overnight bag. It is much more pleasant to fly to Minnesota rather than drive; the difference between three hours and seventeen. Hannibal contents himself on the plane with coming up with every viable theory he can think of as to what he is experiencing. If this is a hallucination brought on by blood loss, he doubts he would be able to change his path rather than just relive it. If this is the afterlife, it seems no one else recognizes themselves as having died, and Hannibal doubts that every person he sees—thousands, now, after traveling through the busy airport—are all ghosts or angels guiding him along to either eternal damnation or exaltation. No, Hannibal is beginning to suspect that this entire thing is some scarce third option that he hardly is able to think of without catching his breath.

A second chance.

Will has already disappeared from the crime scene by the time Hannibal arrives. He gives Jack his own vague psychological profile, listening with amusement at Jack's frustration that there might be a possible copycat.

"Examine the body for physical evidence," Hannibal suggests. "Our killer already made a mistake by allowing metal into Elise Nichols' body. Perhaps he has been sloppy yet again."

Hannibal goes back to his hotel room—one picked and paid for with his own funds, as he refuses to stay in the cheap, run-down room offered to him by the FBI—and meditates on his future. It spools out in front of him like a spilled roll of red ribbon, winding and curved in some parts, the end altogether hidden from view.

When Hannibal knocks on Will's door the next morning, the man is no more happy to see him this time than he was the last.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal greets, his entire body lighting up with joy at the mere sight of Will. And oh, what a sight it is. The man's threadbare shirt and too-tight boxers leave little to the imagination. Hannibal traces Will's body, eyeing the slight swell of his biceps, the hollowness beneath his ribs, the sharp jut of his hip bones as they peek beneath the fabric of his undergarments. Hannibal licks his lips before asking, "May I come in?"

Will stares at him, unmoving. Then, "Where's Crawford?" Will's voice is deliciously raspy from sleep. Dark bags hang beneath his eyes as though he had gotten all of thirty minutes of sleep the previous night. Hannibal wishes to pull him close, to cradle him in his arms, to protect him from everyone and everything that might possibly come between them (including himself).

Instead, he says, "Deposed in court. The adventure will be yours and mine today. May I come in?"

Then Will—his impossible, wonderful boy—changes the script. He begins to close the door, narrowing the space rather than widening it.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," he murmurs.

Hannibal's spine straightens. He clutches the strap of his warming tote as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. "Please. I realize I may have…overstepped during our last meeting. I only wish the best for you, Will. I apologize if my scrutiny made you uncomfortable."

"It's not your scrutiny that makes me *uncomfortable*, doctor. It's your presumption. We hardly know one another. Who are you to barge into my office after a single meeting and claim to know that I am ill, and then claim you have already scheduled an appointment to have my brain scanned. Who does that?"

"A fool such as me, it would seem. I am sorry. I…I will leave you alone."

Hannibal turns to leave but is stopped by a hand on his shoulder. The hand is warm, so very warm. Comfortable. Familiar.

Hannibal is ashamed by the tears that rise up beneath his lashes.

*Do you understand what you do to me?* He wants to shout. *I saw you, Will. Sprawled out on the floor. Dead. Cranium shattered and brain exploded into a thousand scattered pieces. I never thought I'd see your smile again. Smell the scent of your skin. Feel the warmth from your body after it had grown so very cold. I love you, Will. Please let me in.*

"I'm sorry," Will mutters. "I struggle with social interactions even on a good day."

Hannibal turns back around, eyeing Will's lips, the shape of them, the color, the way they are chapped and slightly peeling. "And is today a good day?"

This brings a smirk from Will, though it is more pained than amused. “I suppose we will see. Please, come in.”

Hannibal sets down the protein scramble much as he did in Will’s office—much as he did the first time he was here, with the morning light filtering in through stained curtains, the table scuffed and worn, their positions the exact same as Hannibal plates two portions of food for him and Will to eat.

“Enjoy,” Hannibal says, smiling.

Will dips his head in acknowledgment and takes the first bite. A look of sheer pleasure crosses his face, and Hannibal’s trousers are suddenly far too tight. Hannibal subtly shifts and places a bite of egg into his own mouth, enraptured with Will’s reactions, his open, honest acceptance of satisfaction (a satisfaction that *Hannibal* provided).

“How did you sleep?” Hannibal asks. “I confess I found the arrangements offered to me by the FBI to be rather…lacking.”

“Is that why you stayed at a different hotel?” Will asks. His eyes peer into Hannibal’s own, unhindered by a pair of glasses.

“It is,” Hannibal confesses. He takes a sip of coffee, then asks, “Do you have any idea where we might start our search today? Agent Crawford mentioned he gave you a list of potential construction sites to examine.”

Will glowers into his cup of coffee. “Yeah, I have a few that seem promising. Did Jack assign you to be my chaperone for the day, then?”

“Assistant. You are in charge, not me. I have no experience with field work.”

Will rubs at his tired eyes and finishes the rest of his breakfast in silence. Hannibal remains in the kitchen while Will showers and gets dressed. He’s disappointed to see those hideous glasses marring Will’s eyes once more, another barrier between them. Hannibal aches for the day when Will is able to look into his eyes without fear or trepidation—he dares not hope for a day when Will looks at him with love, though his traitorous heart does not listen and continues to ache for such a thing.

They walk down to the rental car together, Hannibal slipping into the passenger seat while Will takes the wheel. Hannibal cannot help but compare this to the last time he was in a car with Will. The rain pouring down on the windows. The scent of fevered sweetness nearly stifling in the small space.

The sight of Will, alive, breath stuttering and unsure as he took the last sleep of his life.

Hannibal rolls his shoulders and pushes the thought away. He must focus on the now, whatever that now may be. Will is alive. He is solid, real.

He is Hannibal’s, and Hannibal takes good care of what is his.

When they pull up to the first work site, Hannibal cannot help the smile that graces his face.

“What are you smiling about?” Will asks, putting the car into park.

“Peeking behind the curtain. Curious how the FBI goes about its business when it isn’t kicking in doors.”

Will rolls his eyes—good-naturedly, Hannibal hopes—and gestures for Hannibal to follow him up the metal ramp and into the trailer.

The construction site secretary is just as helpful as last time—which is to say, not helpful at all. Will plucks the Hobbs’ file from thin air, and Hannibal purses his lips as he considers what he is about to do.

Hannibal has no fondness for Abigail. No love for her. There is but one person Hannibal loves, and he is willing to do anything for that man.

Including giving him a daughter.

Hannibal helps Will begin loading file boxes into their rental car. He walks back up the ramp, then balances a set of folders on top of a box in order to spill them as a distraction. He hesitates, though, just before tipping the box, and in that split second of hesitation, Will lets out a curse and slips on the metal ramp.

“Will!” Hannibal drops the box he is holding and rushes down to Will’s side. The bottom of the ramp is slick with mud, and Will sits, coated in muck, at the base of it.

“Damn it,” Will groans. He tries to get up, to put pressure on his ankle, but immediately winces from pain and collapses back to the ground. Hannibal catches Will before he can fall, gently guiding the man back to the car so that Will is perched on the edge of the trunk instead.

“Allow me,” Hannibal says. “I was a doctor—”

“I know.”

Hannibal smiles and bends down, ignoring the mud that begins to coat his leather oxfords and bespoke slacks. He rolls up the cuff of Will’s own pants—cheap polyester, worn, probably purchased from a bargain bin at a thrift store—to reveal Will’s swollen ankle.

As Hannibal prods it with careful fingers, Will continues to wince, though he does not utter a single word of complaint.

“Bruised, but not broken,” Hannibal says. “I can drive you to the hospital if you would like.”

“No, no. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Hannibal frowns. “The healing process would certainly go smoother with an ankle brace or some other form of support.”

Will hops down from the trunk, curses at the sudden pressure on his injured ankle, then grins. “What is it with you and trying to get me inside of a hospital?”

Hannibal cannot help the smile that breaks out over his face. “An occupational hazard, I suppose. Though I may no longer be a surgeon, I still am bound by the Hippocratic Oath.”

Will rolls his eyes and pushes up his glasses which had slipped down his nose during his fall. “I’m fine,” he repeats. “Let’s just go to the Hobbs’ residence. Will you drive us there?”

Hannibal nods his head and helps Will into the car. He is disappointed that he could not call Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ to warn him of their arrival, but Hannibal supposes his plan to bring Abigail and Will together is still in motion. After all, Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ is a desperate man, and desperate men are the most dangerous, the most prone to doing reckless things.

It will be interesting to see how this turn of events plays out.

“Are you going to call Agent Crawford?” Hannibal asks. “If Hobbs truly is the man we are searching for, it may be prudent to have backup.”

Will stares at Hannibal’s profile for a moment before fetching his cellphone out of his mud-covered pocket. Hannibal can hear it dial for a few seconds, then Jack’s gruff voice answering on the other end.

Will relays the address of where they are headed, then hangs up with a curt goodbye. The rest of the drive passes in silence, a strange tension growing in the small space the nearer they get to the Hobbs’ house.

Once Hannibal has parked, Will opens his own door slowly. Carefully. He hides his limp well as he makes his way to the front door. Hannibal follows behind, noting that this time there is no dead wife being pushed out onto the front porch as Will peers into a side window.

“They are home,” he says.

“Shall we wait for Agent Crawford?”

Will turns to him, biting down on his bottom lip—an innocuous gesture, one that causes Hannibal’s heart to race and his blood to boil inside of his veins. “That would probably be best. If this *is* the home of the Shrike, we shouldn’t try and enter its nest alone.”

Hannibal nods, slightly disappointed that Will will not be the one pulling the trigger on Garrett Jacob Hobbs today.

He’s more relieved that Will will not be pulling the one pulling the trigger on himself, will not end up on the kitchen floor of the Hobbs’ house, dead.

Compromise. That is what Hannibal is coming to learn. There must always be a compromise.

Jack arrives not long after. The man has enough sense to keep the sirens turned off of the police car he is riding in, though with the amount of vehicles pouring into the driveway, their entry is anything but silent. Local police knock on the front door. Enter the house. Hannibal and Will follow close behind. When Garrett Jacob Hobbs sees them, he immediately grabs a kitchen knife and slices open his wife’s throat, spilling her blood onto the tile floor.

Abigail screams, frozen in terror by her dead mother's side.

One of the officers shoots Garrett Jacob Hobbs in the chest three times. Another runs to Abigail and pulls her away. A third tries to resuscitate Louise Hobbs, but just as the previous time, it is of no use. Her arteries are sliced clean through, a well-practiced cut from a well-practiced hunter. Her eyes are wide and unstaring as blood pours from her neck, and her body empties out into the room.

Hannibal watches it all with a dispassionate stare, more interested in Will's reaction to the whole endeavor.

Will looks…neutral. Assessing. Neither proud he caught the Minnesota Shrike nor saddened by the death of Louise. He, too, watches the scene with an almost distant stare, and Hannibal would give anything in that moment to see what thoughts are racing beneath the man's skull, just out of reach.

Though Abigail is uninjured, she is still taken to the hospital and treated for shock. Hannibal asks Jack whether her care will continue in Minnesota or if she will be transferred somewhere else. The agent responds that Abigail will stay in Baltimore for the time being, at the same mental institution she was placed in before.

"How do you feel?" Hannibal asks Will. They are standing out in front of the house, both staring at the cacophony of people and cars swarming the residence.

"I feel fine," Will responds.

"I seem to sense a pattern here. Tell me Will, are you ever *not* fine?"

Will scowls and wraps his arms around his torso. "Yes."

"But that is not the case today?"

"You're not my psychiatrist, Dr. Lecter. Stop trying to get inside of my head. I said I'm fine. We came and found the Shrike. We saved his daughter. We didn't save his wife. There's nothing more to say about it."

Hannibal looks over Will. There is mud clinging to his shoes this time rather than blood. Mud splattered on his glasses, mud caught in the curls of his hair. His scent is still spiked with fevered sweetness, though that smell is now mixed with anger rather than terror—or the exhilaration after a kill. Even with the bags beneath his eyes and the dirt beneath his fingernails, Will is a stunning creature, a marvel to behold.

Hannibal does not think he has ever looked more beautiful.

"Very well. I will not bother you further."

Will opens his mouth, then closes it shut again. Jack comes over and carts Will away for questioning, threatening Dr. Lecter with the same once they arrive back in Quantico. Hannibal sighs and heads to the rental car. He drives it back to the airport and boards the plane, alone. He goes home, alone. He eats dinner, alone. He goes to bed, alone.

And through it all, Hannibal decides that whatever this is—the afterlife, a dream, some sort of strange version of karma allowing Hannibal to fix the biggest mistake of his life—it truly does not matter. What matters is that Hannibal has been allowed a second chance.

And this time, he will not lose Will.

# Chapter Three

Jack calls Hannibal not long after Abigail Hobbs is transferred to the psychiatric facility in Baltimore.

It happens as Hannibal is driving home after a rather trying day in his office. His phone starts buzzing inside of the pocket of his pressed slacks just as he is changing lanes. Hannibal smoothly moves his car, then answers the call and places it on speakerphone. He sets the phone inside of a cupholder and places both hands back on the wheel, unsuprised to see Jack's name on the screen, wishing it read *Will* instead.

“Hello,” Hannibal says.

“Hello, Dr. Lecter. It’s Jack Crawford. I just received a message from Agent Graham. Sounds like he has been diagnosed with encephalitis. He just got finished with an MRI at Johns Hopkins. You used to work as a surgeon there, correct? I wanted to let you know that Will will be out of the office for the rest of the week to complete his treatment, maybe longer.”

Hannibal is left with a complicated swirl of emotions to unpack upon hearing those words. As happy as he is that Will has finally sought treatment for his encephalitis, Hannibal feels… wounded that he was not informed by Will himself of the diagnosis. Was it not Hannibal that warned the man of his illness? Was it not Hannibal that arranged an MRI and offered to take Will to the hospital on more than one occasion? It seems a slap in the face for Will to go alone to get treatment, and for Hannibal to then find out from Jack Crawford of all people.

Jack continues, unaware of Hannibal’s internal struggle. “I need you to pay Abigail Hobbs a visit as soon as possible. I’ll send you the address of the hospital she’s been moved to.”

“Abigail Hobbs?” Hannibal asks. “Is this a courtesy call or an interview?”

“Both. Will disagrees with me, but as his brain is currently inflamed, I’ll defer to my own judgment in this case. I believe Abigail was complicit in her father’s crimes. It makes sense he hunted with someone else. Hard work, making bodies disappear.”

Hannibal hums as if giving it thought. “Do you believe Abigail was choosing to hunt with her father? A girl her age is highly malleable. She might have been joining in his crimes simply as a way to survive.”

“It doesn’t matter. Seven girls went missing, and if my theory is correct, Abigail helped with their disappearance. I want you to visit her and draw up a profile for me. Can you do that?”

“Of course. Is that all?”

Jack practically growls into the receiver. “No. We have another body. Well, *bodies*. I could use your help tomorrow.”

“Then you shall have it. I’ll visit Abigail tonight and drive to Quantico tomorrow after my morning appointments have concluded.”

“I appreciate it. Goodbye.”

Jack hangs up, and Hannibal frowns and changes lanes once more, turning around back toward downtown Baltimore rather than his home.

Hannibal is intrigued to see how Abigail’s profile will be drawn this time around. Without any failed attempt on her life, he suspects she will be a completely different person than the Abigail that he previously knew.

He just hopes she is still an Abigail that Will connects to and wishes to take under his wing. If not, Hannibal has no qualms about taking care of her in other, less merciful ways.

Hannibal is guided to Abigail’s room by a cheerful old man who has few teeth and even fewer strands of hair. It makes Hannibal think of his own grandfather, a man he met only once or twice before his passing. It’s strange, the way memories resurface at the slightest provocation. Hannibal shakes off the recollection and focuses on the cheerful walls and sparsely decorated room in front of him.

“Hello,” Hannibal greets Abigail. He walks into the familiar hospital room and sets his bag down on a nearby chair. Abigail is lying in bed, no bandage around her neck, a rather sullen expression on her face. “My name is Dr. Lecter.”

“A shrink?” she asks.

Hannibal does not know whether to smirk or frown. He decides on doing neither, keeping his tone completely neutral as he replies, “Yes, though I hope you will come to see me as an ally rather than a nuisance. I was with Agent Graham when the police attempted to apprehend your father.”

“Agent Graham,” Abigail repeats. “Isn’t he the one that they say is crazy? I saw his picture in the news. They said he imagines himself to be the killer when he’s reconstructing murder scenes. That he can read someone’s mind just by looking into their eyes.”

“I see you have discovered TattleCrime.”

Abigail at least has the sense to look slightly embarrassed. “It’s true though, isn’t it? That’s how he found my dad.” She pauses. Swallows. It is strange to see her without a slash across her neck, a puckered scar over her pale skin, to see both ears intact and sitting just right on either side of her face. “He found my dad by thinking like him.”

“Yes,” Hannibal says.

They are both silent for a moment. Hannibal looks over the room, noting the unlatched window and dirty sneakers shoved hastily beneath the bed. It seems Abigail has been rather busy despite arriving at the hospital a mere two days ago.

“Taken to wandering, Abigail?” Hannibal asks.

Abigail panics. Quickly turns her head away from Hannibal's sharp gaze. When she looks back toward him, a flare of anger sparks in her blue eyes. "No," she blatantly lies, and that is simply *rude*.

"I see."

They talk for a few more minutes of mundane things. Hannibal asks if she is well-fed. Abigail responds that the steak at the hospital is more like rubber than meat. Hannibal barely refrains from saying that, after consuming human meat, almost anything will taste like rubber in comparison.

Hannibal leaves the hospital feeling somewhat torn. This Abigail is certainly not like the last. She is more confident. More arrogant.

And that is certainly not a good thing.

Arrogant people are less pliable, less open to manipulation. If Abigail is to be his and Will's surrogate daughter, she will need to change. As it stands, Hannibal would not be sad if Abigail were to simply trip on one of her nightly excursions and break her neck.

With a sigh, Hannibal gets back into his Bentley and heads toward Johns Hopkins. He calls one of the nurses he has kept in contact with since his departure from surgery and tells her there is no need to keep the MRI he had scheduled on hold; it will no longer be needed.

The night is cool, a slight wind blowing from the sea and bringing with it the briny smell of salt and fish. Hannibal parks on the bottom level of the hospital's parking garage and pulls his jacket tighter around his body as he walks inside.

He greets the front secretary with a blinding smile, casually dropping his name and watching with amusement as her movements grow more and more flustered. It appears his reputation is still well known, even by the newer staff members.

"Dr. Lecter! What can I do for you?"

"I am here to see a friend. A Mr. Will Graham. Could I inquire as to which room he is staying in?"

The secretary bites her bottom lip. She glances at her computer screen, then back to Hannibal. "Room 366. Oh, but it says Mr. Graham is not currently accepting any visitors. I'm sorry."

Hannibal stills. He rolls his shoulders and forces a smile back onto his face. "Of course. I apologize for disturbing your evening."

The secretary flushes and giggles, surreptitiously handing Hannibal a business card with her personal cell on the front. Hannibal pockets it and mentally compiles a list of recipes that would be best served by the woman's stout body.

He makes his way out the front door, then heads to the staff entrance around the side. The badge he swiped from the front desk works like a charm. Hannibal soon finds himself on the

elevator up toward the third floor.

Will's hospital room is the complete opposite of Abigail's; white walls instead of blue. Tiled floor rather than carpet. The steady hum of medical machinery rather than quiet. Hannibal takes it all in with a quick, sweeping glance before letting his gaze settle on Will.

Will, who is asleep in his bed, sheets pulled snug around his shivering form. Hannibal strides over to Will in a few large steps and grabs a blanket from the warmer across from the bed. He sets it on Will's body, then tucks in the edges so even if Will shifts in his sleep—as he is prone to doing—the blanket will still stay firmly wrapped around his body, keeping him warm.

Hannibal allows himself to hold Will's hand while the boy rests. The feel of it is comfortable. Familiar. Fingertips covered in calluses, a palm only slightly smaller than Hannibal's. The perfect fit against his own. Hannibal's throat swells up, tightens as he continues to hold Will's hand for the better part of an hour, until he finally forces himself to leave. He will return tomorrow after consulting for Jack. There is nothing that could possibly keep him apart from his beloved. Not now.

The bodies Jack wants Hannibal to look the next day at are…different, to say the least. A mushroom garden thriving on human corpses. Hannibal was not present at this particular crime scene last time, and the pictures posted on TattleCrime did not do it—nor its scent—justice.

Hannibal has to admit the killer certainly has a unique vision.

"Seven bodies, various stages of decay, all very well fertilized," Jimmy Price says. Hannibal appreciates the subtle excitement coming from the man. It *is* a rather exciting garden, after all.

"Well?" Jack asks Hannibal. "What do you think? Has our killer got a peculiar green thumb, or is this something else?"

"I believe we are looking for someone…lonely. They seek a connection that only the soil can provide. Mycelium kill forests over and over, building deeper soil to grow larger and larger trees. The structure of a fungus mirrors that of the human brain. An intricate web of connections."

"So our killer wants to make connections with other people and is…transferring that desire to fungi?"

"It appears so."

"Thank you for your insight, Dr. Lecter. We'll take the bodies back to the lab and see what else we can find."

Just then, an arm rises from one of the graves, breaking through the thin layer of soil to seek the air above. One of the FBI technicians photographing the scene screams—a rather unprofessional reaction, Hannibal thinks. Beverly curses and dials for an ambulance.

Hannibal watches, amused, as the buried, sugar-soaked body is taken in for treatment, already knowing the victim won't survive the short drive over to the hospital.

Hannibal leaves the crimes scene soon after, the rest of his afternoon free. He is near giddy as he goes home, changes into a suit that does not smell of fungi and corpses, and checks the chicken soup he has been slow-cooking for nearly twenty-four hours. Satisfied with its progress, Hannibal packs some into a warming tote and heads over to Johns Hopkins, his stolen ID card gracing his pocket in case Will is still refusing to see any visitors.

"Hello," Hannibal tells the front secretary, a man with thin lips and a rather atrocious overbite. "I am here to see a Mr. Will Graham. Is he accepting visitors at the moment?"

The secretary stares at Hannibal, notes his pressed suit and warming tote, and gives him a condescending smile. "Let me check." The man's fake nails clack away at the keyboard before he looks back up. "It seems he is. You'll find him in room 366."

"Thank you," Hannibal says, too relieved—and frankly surprised—to care much for the man's attitude. "I appreciate it."

The secretary softens, shoulders slumping, and shoos Hannibal toward the elevator with a much sweeter smile than before.

Will's room has not changed, save for the curtains being opened around his window. The view is rather dismal, miles of paved asphalt and parked cars, but Will seems enthralled by the sight, sitting up in his hospital bed with the backrest raised as far as it will go, eyes glued to the ground below.

"Will," Hannibal greets. He breathes in deeply, pushing away the sterile smell of the hospital to find Will underneath. The fevered sweetness has all but disappeared, leaving behind the heady scent of Will—his dogs, the glacial-water sharpness, the intoxicating musk. Hannibal breathes in again and moves to sit beside the bed. "How are you doing?"

"Dr. Lecter," Will says. He eyes the warming tote on Hannibal's shoulder. "Another protein scramble?"

"Soup, actually. I hear it is quite good for the soul."

Will snorts and places his hands into his lap. "You didn't have to. Actually, I…I wanted to apologize. I should have listened to you that first time. You were right, though I doubt you need the confirmation. The doctor said it's anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis. They caught it at the beginning. Apparently, it is the kind of illness that can kill someone if left untreated. You saved my life."

Hannibal's throat clogs. Tears well up in his eyes. His hands spasm, and he grips the armrests of the cheap plastic chair in order to regain some semblance of control. He clears his throat once, twice before saying, "Well, it is a relief, then, that you are getting the treatment you need."

The room falls silent. Will is watching him, that piercing gaze slicing cleanly through Hannibal's person suit as though it were made of gauze.

"How long will you remain in the hospital?" Hannibal asks.

Will scowls and turns to face the window once more. "I'm here for six more days. If the encephalitis was any further along, they might have had to put me into a medically-induced coma for treatment."

"I see." Hannibal lets his eyes rove over Will's profile—enamored, as always, with the jut of his jaw, the scruff of his untrimmed beard, the way his messy curls stick to the back of his neck with sweat. "Are you hungry?"

Will side-eyes the warming tote. "I could eat."

Hannibal beams and opens the bag. He lifts out the ceramic bowl of soup and grabs another empty bowl, this one for Will. The soup is steaming when Hannibal removes the lid, the curl of it lingering in the air as Hannibal ladles a healthy amount into Will's bowl.

"Smells delicious," Will says. "What is it?"

"Silkie chicken in a broth. A black boned bird prized in China for its medicinal value since the 7th century. With wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates and star anise."

"You made me chicken soup," Will teases, taking the bowl from Hannibal and setting it down on the tray across his lap.

Oh, Hannibal *adores* him.

"Yes. I suppose I did."

Will and Hannibal smile at one another for a moment, something small—something warm—before Will takes his first bite of soup and groans.

Heat throbs in Hannibal's groin at the sound. He can imagine so clearly Will making the same noise, only this time it is Hannibal's skill with his mouth causing the pleasure, not his skill in the kitchen.

"It's only been two times that you've brought me food, yet I find I already miss your cooking. After staying in the hospital twenty-four hours, I've learned to dread what 'food' they will bring for my next meal."

Hannibal physically feels his ego swell and expand beneath his rib cage. He grins at Will and crosses his ankles. "I admit, I tried to visit you last evening. I am glad I was turned away; I had not brought any food with me. Perhaps my visit would not have been welcome."

Will blushes and squirms on the bed, legs flexing and then relaxing beneath the thin, white sheets. "I'm sorry if I've made you feel that you are only welcome if you are providing me with something. I…I struggle making connections. That's my burden to bear, though, not yours."

“And yet I would be happy to bear it with you. You do not have to be alone, Will. We were thrust together under unhappy circumstances, but I hope we can become friends regardless.”

Will finishes the last of his soup and sets aside the empty bowl. He licks his lips, spit covering his red mouth so that it shines. Hannibal stares at Will’s lips as the younger man says, “I…I don’t make friends easily. Forts take years to build. They can't be torn down in a day.”

“I understand. I do not expect you to tear down your forts for me, Will. Perhaps one day you will allow me to simply peek over the walls.”

Will considers this. Hannibal shifts, moves so that his ankles are crossing the other way, left leg over the right.

“Let us discuss other things,” Hannibal suggests. “You are healing. There will be time for discussions of forts later, I am sure.”

Will huffs out a laugh and nods his head. “Alright. What would you like to discuss then, Dr. Lecter?”

“Hannibal, please. I am not a doctor here.”

“No? What are you then?”

“An acquaintance. A colleague. Perhaps, one day, a friend.”

“Fine, Hannibal. What do you like to discuss with your…acquaintances?”

“Tell me about your dogs.”

Will pauses. Stares at Hannibal with stormy, blue-gray eyes. “My dogs? How do you know I have dogs?”

Hannibal smirks and gestures to the dog hair lining Will’s hospital gown. “It seems you cannot escape them, even here.”

Will flushes a spectacular shade of pink and dips his chin. “I suppose not. What do you want to know?”

“How many do you have?” Though Hannibal knows the answer, he still aches for Will to open up to him. To trust him, as Will once trusted him in the past—though that trust had been misplaced. That is not the case here, though. Hannibal vows to never do anything that could break Will’s trust, not after seeing the devastating consequences of such a break.

“Seven. I just found another stray only a few days ago. His name is Winston.”

“Winston,” Hannibal repeats. “A handsome name. Who is watching these seven dogs while you are away?”

“A teenaged neighbor of mine, though Alana has promised to stop in at least once this week to make sure they haven’t eaten the poor boy.”

“Would it be terribly rude of me if I also stopped in? I have been experimenting with a new sausage recipe, and I find dogs have much more refined palettes than most of my social circle.”

Will picks at one his nails. His face morphs into something unreadable for a moment, and Hannibal wishes—as he so often does—that he could know what Will is thinking. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I do not *have* to do anything. I have many things I wish to do, though.”

“Okay. Fine. Spoil my dogs with your fancy sausages. But don’t blame me when your clothing ends up with the same amount of dog hair as mine.”

Hannibal grins and nods his head. “Your warning has been noted.”

They chat for another hour of various things. Will tells Hannibal each of his dog's names as well as a snippet of their personality. Hannibal regales Will with tales of the raccoon that lived outside of the orphanage when he was a boy, how each of the children took turns sneaking away food to feed it despite not having much to eat themselves. Will listens to his story with wide eyes, eyes that soften with each spoken word, each detail revealed.

“I had no idea you lived in an orphanage,” he says softly. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a lifetime ago,” Hannibal says, dismissive. “There are many happy memories between then and now.”

“That’s good,” Will says.

Hannibal stands, allows his legs to stretch. “I will leave you to get some rest. I hope the healing process is a smooth one.”

“I think the chicken soup helped,” Will responds.

They grin at each other, and Hannibal packs up Will’s empty bowl as well as the rest of the soup into the warming tote. He gives Will one last, lingering glance before leaving the hospital with a spring in his step and a warmth in his bones that has nothing to do with the sunshine outside.

Jack calls the next day with information from the lab. Again, it is information that Hannibal already knows, but that he listens to it with the appropriate amount of interest.

“There was dextrose in the catheters. Not only was our killer keeping them alive to feed the fungi, they were pumping sugar water into the bodies to make them sweeter. Fungi thrive off of sugar, according to Jimmy Price.” A pause, then, “They each died of kidney failure.”

Hannibal hums and pretends to think. “Perhaps a doctor or pharmacist, then? Someone who works with diabetic patients on a regular basis? An easy crop for them to pick from.”

“We’ll look into it. It will have to be someone mobile, someone able to make patients disappear without causing suspicion.”

“Yes, I think that is most certainly the case.” Jack huffs into the receiver and then gives Hannibal a rushed farewell before hanging up.

After Hannibal has finished with his patients for the day, he grabs the fresh batch of sausage he made from the rest of Cassie Boyle’s lungs and begins the drive to Wolf Trap, Virginia. The ride takes a little over an hour due to traffic. Hannibal spends it listening to Bach and perusing the halls of his Mind Palace—a place which grows more and more filled with Will every day.

When he arrives in Wolf Trap, all seven of Will’s dogs attempt to knock down the front door in their haste to greet him. Hannibal allows himself a moment to look at Will’s house—so much brighter than the last time when he visited, another lifetime ago—before getting out of the car and walking up the porch.

“It is good to see you again,” he says. He opens the door and allows the dogs to rush outside. Some of them immediately begin to sniff him. Others run around the yard, sniffing and urinating and generally making a ruckus. Winston, Will’s newest rescue, is the only one that remains inside the house despite the open door.

Hannibal greets each of the dogs in kind as they finish running around the yard, bending down to pet their heads and allowing them to sniff his hands. They all seem friendly enough, and Hannibal is pleased with the manner of their greeting as he lets himself into Will’s home.

The house is cleaner than the last time Hannibal visited. The smell of stale sweat and fear is almost completely gone, replaced with the smell of dog and freshly-cut grass. Will’s fly-tying kit still rests on his desk, a single fishing lure placed beneath a magnifying glass. The kitchen table is littered with unopened mail and a vase of dried wildflowers. The sink contains a used plate and glass, both of which Hannibal washes by hand before putting back into the cabinet.

Hannibal takes out the brown paper bag containing his homemade sausage and watches with amusement as all seven dogs instantly swarm his ankles.

“Sit,” he commands. Each dog save Winston immediately plops to the ground. “Good.”

Hannibal eyes Winston while feeding the rest of the dogs bits of sausage. Winston gives a soft *woof* and then manages to sit himself, eyeing the sausage with unconcealed hunger.

“Good,” Hannibal repeats. He hands Winston a bit of sausage, pleased when the dog takes it with a gentle mouth and absolutely no hint of teeth.

Hannibal remains at Will’s house for another three hours. He feeds the rest of the sausage to the dogs. He cleans Will’s kitchen, throwing away any expired food in the fridge and sweeping the floor free of dog hair—though he doubts it will remain hair-free for long. He finishes his chores by washing Will’s bedding and remaking his bed. Hannibal makes a list in his head of all the things he would purchase for the boy if allowed: silk sheets; a goose-down comforter; modern kitchen equipment that didn’t look as though it were pulled from a 1970s

house-keeping advert; designer clothes, each tailor-made to fit Will's exquisite form; a car, something more reliable than Will's old Volvo. The list is endless. If only Will would ask, Hannibal is willing to provide so *much*. He aches to give to Will, to show him how precious he is to Hannibal through care and attention and lavish purchases that are still not nearly as exquisite as Will.

Sighing, Hannibal gives each dog one last pet and goes back to his car.

It is no surprise—to Hannibal, at least—that he goes to visit Will in the hospital the next day. This time he brings with him a bowl of Kudal curry (made with coconut, coriander, and chili sauce) as well as a copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The look of amusement on Will's face when he sees the book is more than reward enough for Hannibal's efforts.

"Dante? In the hospital? Is that legal?"

"I don't recall any rules against it, though some of my previous nurses might agree with your opinion. I would like to read to you, if you are amenable to the idea."

Will blushes a fetching shade of red and hums around a spoonful of curry. "Sure. I suppose I'm…*amenable* to that."

Hannibal clears his throat and opens to the first page of the well-worn book. His voice is a gentle murmur as he begins, "*Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a dark forest, for the straightforward pathway had been lost*."

Will is a captive audience. His face changes and shifts with his emotions, an endless stream that dips and weaves and catches depending on the words pouring from Hannibal's mouth. At one point, a thread of tears gather at the corner of Will's eyes, and he quickly swipes them away with the back of his hand. Hannibal makes no mention of this, content to read to his beloved—content to spend time with Will in any way, shape, or form.

Any time in Will's presence is time well-spent.

Eventually, though, Will's nurse comes to check on his progress. She breaks the spell of their room, shattering the illusion of privacy. Hannibal watches her take a sample of Will's blood. The man does not flinch as the needle goes into his skin, nor does he grimace as it slides back out. Hannibal is entranced by the maroon droplet that wells up from the puncture wound; he pictures bending down, licking up the blood, savoring the taste of Will on his tongue.

"Thank you, Mr. Graham. I have to say, you have been a favorite patient of ours. Not a single word of complaint this entire process!"

Will turns an interesting shade of scarlet and picks away at the nail bed of his thumb. "Thanks," he mutters. "Nurses have to deal with the worst of us. It's a simple choice to make your day a little easier."

The nurse beams and pats Will on the back. Hannibal narrows his eyes at the innocuous touch and slowly counts down from ten in his head in order not to do anything…foolish.

“I believe that is my cue to leave,” Hannibal says as soon as the nurse has exited the room. “I have imprisoned you with Dante for long enough.”

Will laughs and runs a hand through his unruly curls. “I…enjoyed it, actually.” He glances up at Hannibal beneath long, dark lashes. “I wouldn’t mind a repeat performance.”

Hannibal’s stomach drops into his feet. The world shifts on its axis. Somewhere above, a choir of angels bursts into song. Hannibal tries to maintain a neutral facade as he says, “Hm. Yes. I think that can be arranged.”

“Great,” Will replies, grinning.

Hannibal packs his belongings and gives Will a polite bow on his way out the door.

On Thursday, Jack manages to find Eldon Stammets. There is no TattleCrime article expounding Will’s many dubious characteristics to coincide with Stammet's arrest. Hannibal must say, despite his enjoyment of Freddie Lounds’s coverage of his—and, he supposes, other serial killer’s—work, he does not enjoy the way she has besmirched Will in the past. Will’s anger is a righteous, tempestuous thing to behold, but Freddie is not worthy of its flame. No, all of Will’s anger belongs to Hannibal and Hannibal alone.

Because of the lack of a TattleCrime article, Mr. Stammets is rather easy to catch. He stays at his workplace pharmacy until dark, and Jack slaps a pair of handcuffs on him so fast the man hardly has a moment to blink before he’s being led into the back of a squad car. Hannibal relays all of this to Will that night, both of them enjoying a cup of homemade coffee and a slice of lemon cake.

“It’s strange,” Will says, sipping on his coffee and gazing at Hannibal’s chin. “At this point, we have both helped Agent Crawford an equal amount. I doubt it was what you pictured when you agreed to create my profile; working a second job as a consultant for the FBI. Now that you’ve found Stammets, Jack will be hard-pressed to let you go. He’s addicted to the smell of success.”

“Unfortunately for our friend Jack, I have no interest in pursuing killers outside of the ones that visit my office. As soon as you are recovered, I plan on returnig all of my focus to my patients. They have been neglected these past few past weeks, I fear.”

Will peers down at his cup, swirling the dregs of coffee grounds as though trying to read his fortune. “And after that? Will I see you again?”

Hannibal wishes to say, *were it possible, not a day would pass without you and I conjoined as* one, but that seems a bit much for this stage of their relationship. Instead, he says, “I would like that, yes. I’ve heard, however, that forts do not dismantle themselves in a day.”

Will huffs and rolls his eyes. “They don’t. But we’ve known each other for a few weeks now. Math imay not be best subject, but even I know that two weeks is more than a day.”

Hannibal grins. “Is this your way of saying you would like to be my friend, Will?”

“Yes.” Will’s answering grin is bright and full, revealing his white teeth and darling smile lines. “I think it is.”

“Then I accept your offer of friendship wholeheartedly. As soon as you are out of the hospital, I would like for you to join me for dinner at my house. My meals are much more elaborate and well-presented when they do not have to be carried inside of a tote. It would bring me great pleasure to cook for you.”

Will’s scent burns with embarrassed happiness. He nods his head, then gives Hannibal his empty coffee cup. Their fingertips brush during the transfer. Hannibal’s heart begins beating double-time, and a bolt of lightning races down his spine at the skin-on-skin contact. If this is how Hannibal reacts to their fingertips touching, he cannot imagine the pleasure that will come from the more intimate parts of their bodies meeting, joining together.

“Thank you,” Will says, though Hannibal is unsure for what. “I’ll let you know as soon as I am released.”

“I look forward to hearing from you.”

Hannibal is already planning the menu for his and Will’s dinner party as he leaves, and by the time he returns home, the menu is fully organized along with a list of ingredients Hannibal will need to purchase or procure.

Another thrill shoots down Hannibal’s spine.

It is time to go hunting.

# Chapter Four

“Hannibal? This is Will Graham. I, uh, got discharged from the hospital. Do you still want to have that dinner?”

Hannibal does not think he’s ever been so giddy to receive a phone call. Attempting to contain his excitement, he immediately replies, “Of course. I have been eagerly looking forward to our dinner. In fact, it has been the shining light guiding me through the darkness of my final appointment this afternoon.”

“Unfortunate patient?”

“Unfortunately.”

Hannibal and Will giggle like schoolchildren.

Hannibal wonders if this is what it means to be in love.

“When would you, uh, want me to come over?”

Hannibal pretends to think on it—as if he hasn’t had every detail planned since he invited Will to dine with him earlier that week. “Would tonight at six be amenable?”

“That would be fine. Should I bring anything? I’m not allowed to drink alcohol for another week, but it feels wrong to show up empty-handed.”

“Ignore the feeling. You are not showing up empty-handed; you are bringing yourself, which is a far greater pleasure than any bottle of wine could afford.”

Will scoffs into the receiver. Hannibal’s risorius muscles hurt from being used for such an extensive period of time. Hannibal does not think he has ever smiled this much in his life. “Such sweet words, Dr. Lecter. You have a clever tongue.”

*You have no idea just how clever* Hannibal wishes to say, but his clever tongue does know when to keep silent, at least occasionally. “You are too kind, Will. I suppose I should have asked the first time I brought you a meal, but do you have any food allergies I should be made aware of? Ingredients I should avoid?” Hannibal already knows the answer. He curses himself for not asking sooner, though; he must not forget that this Will has not yet dined at his table countless times before, has not graced his dining table at all. Tonight will be a first for this Will, and Hannibal intends to make it count.

“No. Thank you for asking. I'll see you tonight at six.”

“Until then,” Hannibal says. They hang up, and Hannibal races home to begin the last of the preparations for their meal. He has three courses planned for tonight's festivities. It is a much more subdued affair than normal for one of his dinner parties, but he doesn’t wish to scare the boy.

To start, Hannibal has prepared prosciutto roses on watermelon. Hannibal knows how much Will loves fresh fruit, and the delicate flowers are the only bouquet Hannibal feels he can comfortably give Will at the moment without causing Will to shy away. The prosciutto is served with a soft goat cheese, something salty and savory to complement the sweetness of the watermelon. Their main course consists of venison medallions with seared *foie gras*. Decadent, yes, but Will's body is recovering from the encephalitis, and his stomach is still far too gaunt for Hannibal's liking—of course, if it were up to Hannibal, Will would never go hungry a day in his life. He would dine on the finest cuts of meat and drink from the richest wines and savor the sweetest desserts. His skin would shine, would glow as Hannibal provided for his beloved. His stomach would fill out, swell into a soft pouch above the sharp cut of hips.

Hannibal realizes he has grown aroused at the mental image, and he quickly adjusts himself in his trousers, rewashes his hands, and finishes garnishing the dark chocolate pomegranate tart he's made for dessert.

At 5:37, Hannibal is combing back his hair. He stares into the mirror and eyes the wrinkles around his mouth and forehead with distaste. At least the silver in his hair brings him a distinguished look; the wrinkles merely make him feel old.

His phone begins ringing. Hannibal gives himself one last, critical glance in the mirror before walking into his bedroom and plucking up his phone from the bedside table. Will's name flashes on the glass screen like a beacon.

"Hello?" he asks, practically purring into the receiver.

"Hannibal? Hi, it's Will. I…I need to cancel our dinner tonight. Jack just called me. Apparently, there has been another body."

Hannibal feels a rush of anger flood his own body; it singes his lungs and burns his limbs. Jack Crawford's name shoots to the top of Hannibal's *to-be-eaten* list. He pinches the bridge of his nose and forces himself not to start shouting out curses as he asks, "And does Agent Crawford know you are still on medical leave? You left the hospital mere hours ago, Will."

"I know." Will's voice is bitter. Dark. He sounds as happy as Hannibal about the situation, which does mollify Hannibal, though only slightly. "I tried to tell him. But he's…"

"Bullheaded? Arrogant? Indomitable in the face of chasing justice?"

Will lets out a short laugh. "Yeah, all of those things. Can I get a rain check on our dinner? I really was looking forward to it."

"As was I, Will. Though I cannot force your hand, I do ask you to reconsider. As you said before, Agent Crawford is addicted to the smell of success. You are successful, Will. He will use that to his advantage, regardless of the toll it takes on your mental psyche. Your well-being is not his priority."

"And it is yours?"

Will's words cut Hannibal like a dagger. He stumbles back a step, clutches to the headboard in order to keep himself upright. The memory of Will—lips turning blue, blood splattered across his chest, a bullet hole where his brain should be—rises in Hannibal, bringing with it a tide of grief that threatens to pull him under. "It is." Hannibal's voice is solemn. A vow.

"Thank you, Hannibal. Jack is doing his best, as am I. It's good to know there is someone in my corner regardless."

"I will always be here for you, Will. Good luck tonight. I hope it is not long before we see each other again."

"I hope so too."

They stay on the line for a moment, silent. Hannibal feels ridiculous. Silly. Juvenile. But he does not wish to be the first one to hang up. Eventually, Will ends the call, and Hannibal is left in his bedroom, dressed and washed and pressed and alone once more.

It takes Hannibal several minutes before he is able to extricate himself from the bedroom and go downstairs. The prosciutto flowers are placed delicately into tupperware and stored in the fridge. The *foie gras* and venison medallions are removed from the heating drawer and set on the countertop to cool. The pomegranate tart is wrapped and put away in the pantry. Hannibal consoles himself with a glass of the wine he was letting breathe for tonight. He downs a half-glass without savoring the taste, then pours himself another glass and sits on a bar stool in the empty kitchen. He swirls the wine in his hand. The notes he detects are pleasant to be sure.

Will smells better.

Hannibal suspects Will tastes better, too.

Hannibal sighs. He frowns. Now that all of his plans for tonight have been for naught, Hannibal does a mental pivot. He finishes his glass of wine, locks up the house, then drives out to his second residence near the cliffs.

Miriam Lass is exactly how Hannibal left her. Sedated and resting on a medical table deep in the bowels of the basement. Hannibal checks her vitals, brushes her hair, then fills her IV with saline to flush out the medication keeping her asleep. As she slowly wakes up, Hannibal begins the process of psychic driving.

Hannibal never had the chance to test the effectiveness of his experiments with Miriam last time around. His plans for both Miriam and Frederick Chilton had been interrupted by Will's untimely death. This time, though, will be different. His framing of Chilton will be so complete that no one, not even the brilliant Will Graham, will question that Chilton is the Ripper.

After all, if Hannibal and Will are to have the winter wedding he has already begun planning, the Ripper must be far behind, a relic of the past. Just as *Il Monstro* was a skin that Hannibal shed when it began to grow too tight, so too will the Chesapeake Ripper get left behind as Hannibal grows, morphs into something new.

Hannibal has more important things to worry about than the escapades of his alter ego.

Miriam's session lasts an hour. Hannibal plies her with sodium amytal. He flashes a bright light in front of her hazy eyes and plays a recording of Chilton's voice, allows it to croon in her ears before putting her back to sleep.

In the morning, Hannibal does not hear from Will. Nor the day after, or the day after that. When three days have passed without a word from the boy, Hannibal decides to take matters into his own hands. He packs the leftovers from his failed feast and brings them to Will's office at Quantico, making sure to wear one of his nicer suits, a maroon ensemble that brings out the color of his eyes—and the tight curve of his ass.

Hannibal arrives around noon. He knocks on the closed door of Will's office, wishing there were a window that he could peer into in order to gauge the boy's mood.

Will opens the door with a surly expression, one that immediately lifts upon seeing Hannibal before falling somewhere in the realm of neutral.

"Dr. Lecter," Will greets.

Ah, so they are back to *doctor*, then. "Will. May I come in?"

Will looks behind himself, eyeing the scattered papers lining his desk. "I fear this isn't the best time."

"Have you eaten lunch?"

Will's shoulders slumps. His plush lips fall, arc downward like the path of a shooting star. "No." There's an edge of defeat in his voice.

"I thought so," Hannibal says, sniffing. "Please, allow me to feed you. For my sake if not for your own."

Will sighs and opens the door all the way. "Come in, then." Will walks back to his desk and scoops up the—frankly overwhelming—amount of papers, shuffling them into a haphazard pile that he throws onto the floor near his chair. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Simply stopping by to check in on a friend," Hannibal replies. He gracefully sits into the chair opposite Will's and brings his proffered food onto the desk. "I was worried Jack had swallowed you whole and refused to spit you out."

"Another biblical reference? I must admit, Dr. Lecter, I had you pegged for an atheist when we met."

"Me and god have a complicated relationship," Hannibal says blithely. "And please, call me Hannibal."

Will flushes scarlet and flops down into his own chair. He runs a hand through his messy curls, pushes his glasses further up his nose. "I'm sorry. For…everything. I'm afraid this case has taken all of my attention and left none for other pursuits."

“And what case would that be?” Hannibal asks as he takes out the prosciutto flowers. He cannot help but preen at Will’s wide-eyed stare, his ego only inflating as Will’s scent bursts with happiness. Hannibal places several of the flowers onto a plate and pushes it toward Will. “Prosciutto with melon,” Hannibal announces.

“Doctor Le—Hannibal, these look incredible. I almost feel guilty for eating them.” Even as he says this, he plucks the nearest flower off of the plate and places it on his tongue. His expression instantly morphs into one of pleasure, of contentment. He chews, slowly and carefully, before swallowing.

Hannibal shuffles as inconspicuously as possible and clears his throat. “I never feel guilty about eating anything. I am glad you enjoy the presentation. The Japanese call the art of food presentation *moritsuke*. I fear we have somewhat lost that art in America.”

“And you are single-handedly bringing it back?”

“One can only hope.” A pause. Then, “You are avoiding my question, Will. What case has taken so much of your attention?”

Will finishes his second prosciutto flower. He wipes his hands on his trousers, eyes landing somewhere behind Hannibal’s right shoulder. His voice is full of gravel as he says, “We are calling them the Lost Boys. Children thought to be abducted who turn up back at home only to kill their entire family.”

“How does that make you feel, Will?”

“Oh, no. You said not to call you doctor. Don't try to act like my psychiatrist now.”

“I apologize.” Hannibal reaches down and brings out the venison medallions and seared *foie gras*. The tupperware is still warm from being reheated, a small mercy. Hannibal abides by many things, but cold food that should be hot is not one of them. “Please, accept this as a peace offering of sorts. I cannot promise to never slip into the role of therapist again, but I will try my best.”

Will snorts but allows Hannibal to put a healthy serving of food onto his plate. “Thank you.”

They are silent as Will chews. Hannibal glances around the room, noting the lack of Aspirin bottles lining the desk—or the wastebasket. “Have your headaches been resolved, then?”

“Yes. It seems the encephalitis was causing a whole host of problems. I haven’t had any more headaches, and the nightmares are slowly tapering off.”

Hannibal nods his head and brings out dessert. Will eats an entire slice of pomegranate tart in a matter of seconds. His ears burn pink and his scent changes, turns into the smell of roasting peppers as he becomes embarrassed. Hannibal wonders if Will even realizes how adorable he is, how lovely, how utterly enchanting he appears in his every mood and whim.

“I take that as a compliment,” Hannibal says, nodding toward the missing slice of tart. “Please, have another. I have more than enough for the both of us.”

Will frowns, rubs away a stray crumb from his bottom lip—a crumb Hannibal would have been more than happy to lick away (if only). “I’m sorry again for missing our dinner. It’s… I…”

“Have I done something to offend you, Will? Besides the matter of my current occupation.”

Will laughs, eyes crinkling at the corners. “No, no offenses have been committed. And I don't… mind that you are a psychiatrist. As long as you publish any studies about me post-mortem.”

“I do not publish studies of my friends, Will.”

Another blush, this one tinged purple like a blooming larkspur. “I appreciate that. This case has just been hard. I see what these boys are throwing away, and it hurts to witness.”

“Family,” Hannibal supplies.

“Yeah. Family.”

“Do you have a family, Will?” Will raises his eyebrow, gives Hannibal an unimpressed look that goes straight to Hannibal’s groin. “It is a perfectly reasonable thing to ask a friend. And I do not expect you to answer without recourse; I am happy to answer any questions you might have about my own lfamily in return.”

“Alright.” Will steeples his fingers and places them underneath his chin. He puts his elbows on the desk and leans forward so that his face is closer to Hannibal. “No, I don’t have any family. My mother left when I was an infant. My father died three years ago. Liver failure.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” Hannibal says. “No matter the manner of the relationship, there is still a blood tie that bursts when it is broken.”

“Thanks.” Will looks directly in Hannibal’s eyes, then. The blue of his irises shifts, shimmers like water in a fast-moving stream. “And you? Any family?”

“No, not anymore. I was orphaned at a young age.” Hannibal takes a deep breath and steels himself. This is love, he supposes. Opening oneself up to vulnerability, knowing it can be taken and used as a weapon. Hannibal only hopes Will decides to hold the handle of the knife he is offering without pushing the blade back into Hannibal’s exposed heart. “I had a sister, once. She also died when I was young.”

Will’s entire demeanor changes. His empathy picks up on Hannibal’s grief. His pain. Will’s own face morphs, contorting into an expression of endless agony. “I’m sorry,” he says. It is not just an empty platitude. Not from Will, anyway.

“It was many years ago.”

“But you still grieve. There are some wounds that even time cannot heal.”

Hannibal bows his head, forces away his pain until it is buried deep beneath his person suit. “One can only hope,” he says. “I apologize for the turn our conversation has taken. It was not

my intention to fill your lunch hour with shared grievances. It is not good for digestion."

Will laughs, low and sweet. He tilts his head back and exposes the long, pale expanse of his throat. Hannibal's teeth ache to sink into that unblemished flesh, to mark Will for the entire world to see. To prove to anyone that might look that Will is *his*.

A knock at the door interrupts his thoughts. Without even turning, Hannibal smells the expensive cologne and sharp scent of stress that heralds the arrival of Jack Crawford.

"Good, you're both here," he says, walking into Will's office without waiting for an invitation. Rude.

"Agent Crawford," Hannibal greets, voice pleasant. Will eyes Jack with much more wariness. A predator tracking a fellow beast. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I would like for you both to visit Abigail Hobbs. I still want a profile drawn up as soon as possible, and with the two of you working together, we have the highest likelihood of her confessing."

"Confessing to what, Jack?" Will asks. "I already told you that she is not a killer."

"Maybe, maybe not. She does not need to hold the knife to be complicit in her father's crimes."

Will lets out a growl, and a thrill runs up Hannibal's spine at the sound. "Fine. We'll go talk to her. But I am not wringing out a confession where there is none to be had. You can't force someone to be guilty, Jack."

Jack holds up his hands and takes a step back. "Just talk to her. That's all I am asking."

"We will," Hannibal says. He stands and begins putting away the used dishes from Will's lunch. "Thank you."

Jack nods his head at the dismissal and leaves without another word. Hannibal finishes packing his items before turning to Will. "If you do not wish to come, I have no qualms about visiting Abigail by myself."

Will pinches the bridge of his nose. He stands and walks toward the door with a look of near-agony on his face. "No, it's fine. Let's just get this over with."

"Shall we take my car? There is no need to both drive when we are going to the same place."

"Sure." Will and Hannibal walk down the hallway of the academy and head into the warm spring air together. It smells of fresh blossoms and wet soil outside. Hannibal breathes deeply, savoring the scent of life, then leads Will towards where he parked his car.

"If you do not mind me asking, why are you so sure that Abigail is innocent?"

Will slides into the passenger seat as Hannibal puts away the tote bag into the trunk. Will is frowning as Hannibal gets into the front seat of the car. He finally answers once Hannibal has

backed out of the parking lot and turned onto the street. “I never said she was innocent. I just don’t think that she is a killer.”

Hannibal’s mind flashes back to the Abigail of last time. The way she clutched the hunting knife she had stuck deep into the bowels of Nicholas Boyle, a look of panic on her face as fresh blood coated her fingertips. “I see. And why do you think she is not a killer?”

“Would you believe me if I said it was just a feeling?”

Hannibal smiles and glances at Will’s profile. The light frames his hair and casts it into lovely shades of chocolate and caramel. The sunlight makes his face seem younger, more innocent. Hannibal wonders if Will has any idea how enchanting he is. How Hannibal would throw himself onto a knife for merely a smile cast in his direction. How Hannibal would tear out his still-beating heart and place it into Will’s hand if only the boy were to ask. How Hannibal would do anything and everything if it meant Will would love him back.

Probably not.

“I would believe you,” Hannibal says. “For someone with your gift, a feeling is practically a certainty.”

“I wish. That would definitely make my job a hell of a lot easier.”

The rest of the drive to Port Haven is spent with Will recalling some of the previous cases he has worked on. Some Hannibal has heard of, others he has not. Each case he listens to with rapt attention, aware of how meaningful it is that Will is opening up to him in this way, is comfortable sharing his past trauma with Hannibal when he is not required to do so, not this time. In some ways, Hannibal regrets he is not Will’s therapist anymore. It certainly brought about the most intriguing conversations, allowed Hannibal a peek into Will’s skull without forcing his hand. Now, though, any conversations they have together are brought about simply because Will wishes to speak about such things, and the victory in that—Will’s trust, his belief that Hannibal will listen to him and keep his secrets safe—is ever-so-sweet to taste.

Abigail is not lying in bed when they arrive in Port Haven, nor is she in one of the two recreation rooms for patients. Instead, she is out walking the grounds, a look of steady determination on her face as she loops around the greenhouse.

“Abigail,” Hannibal greets once they are near enough that he can speak without shouting. “It is good to see you looking so refreshed.

Abigail pauses in her walking and turns to face Hannibal and Will. She eyes them both with wary disdain. “Hello, Dr. Lecter. Special Agent Graham.”

“You know my name?” Will asks.

“I do.” Abigail offers no further explanation as to how or why, and Will does not press her for any answers. “Here on behalf of the FBI?”

“I’m afraid so,” Hannibal says. “Would you care to join us on a stroll?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“There is always a choice, Abigail,” Will says.

Abigail frowns and glances back towards the hospital. “Fine. I’m not ready to go back inside yet anyway.”

Hannibal flashes a perfunctory smile. “Perfect.”

The three of them fall into a line, Hannibal in the middle with Will and Abigail on either side of him. They walk for a few minutes in silence, the quiet of their stroll impeded on only by the distant chittering of birds and the occasional thrum of an engine.

Abigail is the first to break the tension. She turns to Hannibal and asks, “Am I a suspect?”

“No,” he replies. “All of the murders have been linked to your father.”

“But they think I helped.”

Hannibal’s silence is answer enough.

Will keeps his voice neutral as he says, “Abigail, people exhibit all sorts of behaviors when they are under stress. You are still a child. No one would blame you for doing what you had to do in order to survive.”

“But they would.” Abigail stops beneath a large oak tree. She stares up at its billowing leaves as she says, “They already have. Freddie Lounds posted an article about what people are saying. Online. In the real world.” She turns to face Hannibal and Will. Tears stream down her face, make her blue eyes bright and sparkling. “They graffitied the word *cannibal* onto my house. There is no going back now, whether I’m innocent or not. The world deemed me guilty, and the world is its own judge, jury, and executioner.”

Will shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter what the world thinks, Abigail. What matters is what *you* know. Having a strong grip on your own innocence is enough of a shelter to weather any storm.”

Abigail tilts her head as she ponders Will’s words. “I suppose.” She forces Will to meet her eyes as she asks, “Do you think I’m innocent?”

“I don’t think you are a killer,” Will says, a remnant of his conversation with Hannibal.

Abigail notices his choice of words. What he says (or, rather, what he *doesn’t* say). Her frown deepens. “I think I want to go back inside now.”

Will sighs and rubs a tired hand over his eyes. “Of course. Listen, Abigail, what you experienced would be traumatizing for anyone. That trauma is not going to heal itself in a day. Hannibal and I are here to help you, if you want. I’m not going to force you to talk, I’m sure you get enough of that in therapy. But if you do decide to speak, I promise I will be here to listen.”

Abigail nods her head and swipes away the rest of her tears. She rolls her shoulders, sets them into a straight line. “I suppose I will be seeing you again?”

“Yes,” Hannibal replies. “Agent Crawford is not done with you yet, I’m afraid.”

They escort Abigail back to the hospital. She manages to wrangle a promise from them that, during their next visit, they must bring Abigail some books to read as the ones here are all censored and “more clean than my grandmother’s underpants” (according to Abigail).

“Thoughts?” Hannibal asks Will as soon as they are back in the car.

“She is definitely hiding something,” Will says. “But I don’t think it's murder.” He leans his head against the window and stares out at the waning sunlight. Hannibal shudders, remembering the last time Will leaned against that same pane of glass (remembering what happened to him after).

“I would like to take you to the opera this weekend,” Hannibal says, apropos of nothing.

“What?” Will twists, turns so that he is staring at Hannibal. Hannibal forces himself to keep his eyes on the road. “The opera?”

“Yes, the opera,” Hannibal murmurs. “I believe you would enjoy it. The Baltimore cultural arts scene is lively and well-funded. This weekend they will be performing *La Bohème* by Puccini.”

Will is shaking his head before Hannibal is able to finish his sentence. “While I…*appreciate* the offer, the opera is the last place you would want to invite someone like me.”

“Someone like you?”

“Don’t play coy, Hannibal. The amount of people attending an event like that would be enough to put me off, but add in the social decorum and finery, and I’m lost. I would embarrass you.”

“You could never embarrass me, Will. It is an honor to be your friend. I do not take that honor lightly.”

Will splutters, begins waving his hands in the air as he speaks. “Hannibal, trust me on this. We have only known each other a few weeks, so you haven’t witnessed me at a social event before, but I know myself well enough to know that the opera is no place for me. I’m sorry.”

Hannibal frowns—he most certainly does not *pout*—and turns back into the academy parking lot. “I am sorry to hear it, Will. I have already secured two tickets in my regular box seat. Is there truly nothing I can say to convince you?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Though I am flattered you've extended the invitation at all.”

“Think nothing of it. I suppose this is goodbye, then.”

Will's eyes dart from Hannibal's hair, down to his lips, then land on his chin. "Goodbye, Hannibal. I hope it won't be long before we see each other again."

"Of course. You still owe me a dinner, after all."

Will smiles. Hannibal's heart skips a beat inside of his chest. When Will exits the car, it takes all of Hannibal's strength not to open his own door and chase after the man. It seems that each parting grows more and more painful, as if Hannibal's love for Will is an open wound, and each time Will leaves, it rips open the wound's sutures and causes it to bleed anew.

Sighing, Hannibal drives home and calls Alana Bloom.

"Hannibal!" she says, voice pitched high with delight. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I seem to have found myself with an extra ticket to the opera this weekend. Would you care to join me on Saturday evening?"

Alana's tittering laugh grates on Hannibal's nerves, but he reminds himself that this is all for Will. Jealousy is a most-powerful motivator, after all. Otherwise, Hannibal would not waste his time with Alana. She is merely a pawn in his game to secure Will's affections. Nothing more.

Hannibal picks up Alana at five o'clock sharp. He is wearing a black suit with navy accents. Alana's navy gown matches flawlessly, just as Hannibal had planned. He makes sure they are both photographed during the evening, first as Hannibal is helping Alana out of his car, then again when they are side by side in the foyer of the opera house.

Alana is…boring. Predictable. Lovely and charming and utterly bland compared to Will. There is no spark in her eyes, no hidden darkness lurking in her gaze. Her answers all have the same moral backbone that Hannibal quickly tires of. She is like a pretty bauble on his arm, another accessory along with his cuff links and bow tie.

The opera is superb as always. Hannibal is the first to rise for the standing ovation and the last to finish his round of applause. Alana watches this with surprise and mild amusement. She notes the tears staining his face but says nothing of them, merely wraps her hand around his arm and meanders with him toward the exit.

Hannibal takes Alana back to her home, bidding her a perfunctory goodnight.

He goes back to his own house and strips his aching cock in the shower, imagining Will kneeling beneath him, pink lips parted, cerulean eyes reduced to black with arousal. Hannibal's orgasm crashes through his body and causes him to shout. The sound of it echoes in the empty bathroom, and when Hannibal comes down from his pleasure, he feels more alone than ever.

Beverly Katz calls him a few days later.

"Hi, is this Dr. Lecter?" Her voice sounds shaken, as if she is doing everything in her power to keep it controlled, yet still cannot keep the tremor from her words.

“Yes, it is. I presume this is Ms. Katz?”

“Hi, yes, that’s me. Listen, Will is…we need you here. We tried to call Dr. Bloom, but she is too busy to help; we’re at a scene in North Carolina. Will had a panic attack on-sight, and there are no other psychiatrists that can come all the way out here, as far as I know. I understand it would be a huge imposition on your time, but could you come treat him? There’s a plane waiting at the tarmac. It’s a short flight.”

“What’s the information for the plane?” Hannibal asks, already sending out an email to cancel the rest of his afternoon appointments. He claims it is due to a family emergency. It is the truth, after all. Will is Hannibal’s family, whether the boy is aware of it or not.

“I just sent it in a text. Thank you, Dr. Lecter.”

“Tell Will to hold on. I’m coming.”

Hannibal is surprised he is not pulled over on his way to the tarmac. At one point his odometer reads 120 MPH, and the wind whips his car like a lash, nearly sending him careening off the road and into the drainage ditch along the side. The plane is small, government-issue. It takes off as soon as Hannibal is seated and arrives in North Carolina mere moments later. An SUV is waiting for him once they land. When Hannibal finally arrives at the crime scene, he barrels past a swarm of FBI agents in black vests and marches straight toward Jack Crawford.

“Where is he?” Hannibal asks. He manages to keep his voice under a shout, but only barely.

Jack nods toward the house. “Inside. It’s still an active scene, so please do not touch anything.”

Hannibal wants to snarl, to curl his upper lip and sink his teeth into Jack’s throat until the man’s useless pulse is put to better use as a palette cleanser. Instead, Hannibal thanks Jack and marches into the house, eyes immediately finding Will among the rabble.

Will, who is crouched on the ground, arms wrapped around his knees, a flood of tears streaming down his face.

Hannibal walks right up to Will and crouches down beside him. He ignores the strange looks cast his way by the other law enforcement, ignores the sound of sirens in the distance, ignores everything but Will—his breathing, the smell of distress on his skin, the sheen of sweat coating his forehead.

“Will,” Hannibal murmurs. He brings up his finger and wipes away one of the boy’s tears. “Will, can you hear me?”

Will’s shaking stops, if only the slightest amount.

“I need you to repeat after me: My name is Will Graham. It is…” Hannibal pauses, checks the time on his watch, “4:37 in the afternoon. I am in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I am safe.”

“M…My name is Will Graham.” Will’s jaw shakes, trembles with each syllable. “It is 4:37 in the afternoon. I…I am in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I am safe.”

“Good,” Hannibal coos. “Can I help you to stand?”

Will nods, head jerking down quickly before darting back up. Hannibal gently places his hands beneath Will’s elbows and guides the boy so that he is standing. Hannibal relishes Will’s closeness, the way he leans into Hannibal’s body rather than away from it. Still staying close, Hannibal guides Will out of the home and into the SUV that drove Hannibal here from the airport. He helps Will into the vehicle and closes the door, sliding into the seat next to him.

They are alone in the car. Hannibal can hear Will’s heartbeat pounding inside of his chest, can see the tremors running through his body as he tries to sit still.

“What happened, Will?” Hannibal asks.

Will’s eyes are wide, wild. They dart from Hannibal’s face to the window, then to the floor before settling on Hannibal’s face once more. “The Lost Boys. I thought…I thought my encephalitis was cured, Hannibal. But I saw him.”

“Saw who?”

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” Will whispers, as if the name itself is some talisman of evil he is afraid to speak aloud.

“Where did you see him?”

Will raises a trembling hand. He points to the backyard, to the front of the pool house where a puddle of blood is slowly drying on the ground. “There. Beverly shot the woman responsible for taking the boys. She…her face disappeared. Her body morphed. Changed until it was *him* lying on the ground, *him* with the bullet wound, *him* bleeding out.”

Hannibal feels his heart ache for the boy. How had he ever delighted in tormenting Will with visions and hallucinations? How had he ever thought that this was the right course, to twist Will up and then watch him slowly unwind until there was nothing left of himself but an empty shell? Hannibal bitterly regrets what he did, but that is in the past.

There is nothing left now but to move forward and make sure it does not happen again.

“Will, there is nothing for you to be concerned about. Your encephalitis may have been treated, but it is common for symptoms to linger long after the medication has finished. You might experience hallucinations for weeks or even months after leaving the hospital. It is not a sign that you are sick again; it is merely the malingerings of an illness that is slowly being drawn from your veins.”

Will’s shoulders slump. His eyes are dry, no longer shining with unshed tears. He stares directly at Hannibal as he asks, “How did you get here? We’re a bit far from Baltimore. Don’t you have patients to see?”

“I canceled my afternoon appointments as soon as Ms. Katz called,” Hannibal replies. He is delighted by the delicate flush that graces Will’s pale, creamy skin. “The FBI was kind enough to charter a flight so that I might arrive at a reasonable time. I apologize for acting in my capacity as a psychiatrist; I know I promised we would only be friends.”

“Don’t apologize,” Will says, shaking his head. “You helped me, Hannibal. More than you know. I…My mind was in a place it has not been for a long time. A dark place. You helped pull it out.”

Hannibal tries to still the absolute joy that courses through his body at the confession. “It was my pleasure, Will. I just want you to be happy.”

“Yeah,” Will says, eyeing Hannibal with a strange expression on his face. “I think I’m beginning to believe you.”

# Chapter Five

Even though Hannibal knows what is to come, he still is unable to contain the flare of irritation that rises inside of him when Abel Gideon proclaims himself to be the Chesapeake Ripper. The sheer audacity of such a claim…

Hannibal grits his teeth. He clenches his fists. He has to set down his tablet, lest he break the screen in frustration.

It is time Hannibal paid a visit to the BSHCI.

Donning an all-black suit, a silver tie, and a waistcoat with suspenders—Hannibal may be going to a mental hospital, but that does not mean he must lower his standards—Hannibal makes an appointment with Frederick Chilton to interview Abel Gideon.

Agent Crawford was going to send Will to conduct the interview, but after Will's breakdown in North Carolina, Hannibal finally convinced the infernal agent that Will *must* rest if he is ever to properly heal from his encephalitis. That meant no field work for at least a few weeks, if not a few months. It was only when Hannibal threatened to put in a complaint with the FBI for improper conduct that Jack finally relented and allowed Hannibal and Alana Bloom to go in Will's stead to the BSHCI.

Jack cared more about keeping his record clean than making sure Will survived to the end of the week.

Hannibal relishes the day he can kill Jack and serve his heart to Will on a silver platter—perhaps with a side of grilled artichoke. Will seemed to particularly enjoy that side dish the last time Hannibal brought him lunch.

"Dr. Lecter! Dr. Bloom!" Chilton greets once the pair arrive at the hospital, fake cheer on his face. He jauntily makes his way to the door of his office and opens it wider for Hannibal and Alana to walk through. "A pleasure. I see you have heard about my prized patient. Curious to finally meet the Ripper?"

"Indeed," Hannibal replies, holding back an eye roll. He is amused to note that Alana is just as impressed with Chilton's theatrics as he is (which is to say, not at all). "It *is* rather incredible that the most notorious serial killer in recent history has been under our noses this entire time."

"Sometimes the most important things in life are the things we cannot see," Chilton intones with fake sagacity. "Please, allow me to escort you down."

"There's no need," Alana says. Hannibal wholeheartedly agrees. "We will be conducting our interviews separately. Hannibal, would you like to go first?"

"I can think of no greater pleasure." Hannibal does not wish to spend even a single moment more in Chilton's presence than is required. "I will try to keep it as brief as possible."

“Very well,” Chilton pouts. “Don’t either of you fret; I have all of my cameras pointed toward his cell. The Ripper will not harm you while I am on watch.”

“A relief,” Hannibal says dryly. He leaves Chilton’s office and walks downstairs into the bowels of the BSHCI. The place he almost had Will imprisoned. As Hannibal walks through the narrow stone caverns and past the iron-barred cells, he cannot help but be glad that such a place was never Will’s fate. Will would have wilted like a dried-up stalk under such conditions. His skin, so pale already, would have become sallow and translucent without sunlight. His hair would have grown lank and dry without proper care. His mind would have festered, an open wound without treatment, and Hannibal would have been denied the constant balm of his presence. And, perhaps worst of all, Will would have been subjected to Chilton’s version of psychiatric care. Twenty-four hours a day.

No, Hannibal is certainly glad that his plans did not come to fruition, at least in that regard.

Abel Gideon is standing in front of his cot when Hannibal reaches the man’s cell. The faux-Ripper is wearing white pajamas that showcase his paunch (and certainly not to his advantage). His facial hair has grown wild and unruly in prison. It hides his chin but not the wrinkled skin of his aging neck. Altogether a man as banal as Hannibal remembered.

“Hello,” Abel drawls as soon as Hannibal stops walking. “And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with today? I haven’t seen *you* before.”

“Dr. Lecter,” Hannibal says. He is already eyeing Abel, noting which cuts to make, which parts are necessary for his plan and which are not. Abel is his prized pig, a sheep which thought it was being raised for wool only to end up beneath the blade at the slaughterhouse.

Abel is Hannibal’s tool, the one which he is going to wield in order to break Frederick Chilton.

“I love the accent,” Abel says. “Very austere. I’m sure many of your patients would do anything you say simply because of the sound of your voice.”

“I appreciate the compliment, Dr. Gideon. Would you like to begin?”

“So professional. Very well, I suppose I have nowhere else I need to be.”

The interview is exactly as Hannibal imagined it would go; Abel Gideon’s mind is fractured, scattered, a wake of vultures picking at pieces of brain matter and leaving only an empty skull behind. Hannibal finishes asking his questions, then walks back upstairs and gestures for Alana to take her turn with the prisoner.

“An interesting man, Abel Gideon,” Hannibal says as soon as she is gone. Chilton is seated at the chair behind his desk, fingers steepled beneath his chin, legs spread wide with faux confidence.

“Indeed. He has proved most elusive in his interviews, but with my superior tactics I’ve been able to draw out a confession at last.”

Hannibal clears his throat and sits primly in the seat opposite Chilton's desk. "It truly is a shame what happened to your nurse. I am surprised a member of your staff was allowed to be alone with a patient who has claimed to be a cannibalistic serial killer."

Chilton frowns at the mention of the nurse—at the mention of his failure. "Gideon has been a model patient for two years. It was…unexpected that he should act so violent."

"The Chesapeake Ripper certainly defies expectation."

"That he does."

Hannibal sighs, inwardly imagining himself choking the life out of Chilton, reducing his smug face to nothing more than a bouquet of broken blood vessels. "Did you discuss the Chesapeake Ripper's crimes with Dr. Gideon before he murdered the night nurse?"

Chilton nods, as if this admission is a testament to his superior skills as a psychiatrist rather than damning evidence of his guilt. "I started mentioning his crimes as soon as I began to suspect who he was. Feeling he was about to be exposed may have spurred him to action."

They talk of Dr. Gideon and Chilton's unsubtle psychic driving of the man until Alana reappears. She swoops in like an avenging angel, angrily chewing out Chilton for his treatment of Gideon before spiriting Hannibal away.

"Thank you," Hannibal says once they are outside. He opens Alana's door for her, offering his hand to help her into her Prius. "I do not believe I was adequately prepared to handle Chilton alone." He was prepared (of course), but Alana is a useful ally, and she always works better when greased with oily words of praise.

"I don't think that's something any person can be adequately prepared for," Alana retorts. She brushes her long black hair away from her face and gives Hannibal an expression that borders on flirtatious. "Need another opera partner? I hear they are performing *The Magic Flute* this weekend. I've always wanted to hear the aria in-person."

"I am afraid I already have plans for this particular weekend," Hannibal says, affecting an air of regret. "A dinner party for a few of my intimate friends. Would you do me the honor of joining instead?"

"Of course! I would never miss one of your dinners."

"Then it is settled. I'll see you at six o'clock on Saturday."

Alana smiles and turns the key into her engine. "Goodbye, Hannibal."

They part ways, Alana going back to Quantico to provide a briefing for Jack about the details of their visit while Hannibal goes to his office for an appointment.

Hannibal enjoys many aspects about being a psychiatrist. His own emotions have always been somewhat blunted, slightly more muted than the average human. Being able to see how other people emote or interact with the stimuli around them is how Hannibal has been able to craft his own perfectly-tailored person suit. He enjoys digging around in the brains of the

sheep and pigs that visit his practice. Enjoys drawing the darkness out of their minds as one would draw water from a well. Enjoys driving his patients to madness, allowing their instincts to take over until they are nothing more than slaves to their worst emotions.

Yes, he enjoys many things about his chosen profession.

Franklyn Froideveaux is not one of them.

Luckily for Franklyn, his days are numbered. As surely as the passage of time marches onward with the rising of the sun, Franklyn's life is slowly but inevitably marching toward its pitiful end.

Hannibal drags himself home after the appointment, showers—to wash off the smell of cheese, sweat, and mildewed air from the BSHCI—and sits in front of his fireplace with a glass of wine. He swirls it, noting the hints of cherry and bitter almond, before taking a sip. It is delicious, woody and deep and just what Hannibal required after a day like today.

Sighing, Hannibal sets aside his glass and reaches into his pocket for his phone. He pulls up Will's contact—noting, with some amusement, that the last text from Will was a picture of Winston covered in mud and a rather intriguing emoticon—and presses the *call* button.

It rings once, twice, before Hannibal is greeted with a rough, "Hello?"

Hannibal cannot suppress the shiver that runs down his spine at the sound of Will's throaty voice. "Good evening, Will. I hope I am not interrupting anything?"

"No, I just finished cleaning up the dishes from dinner. How are you doing tonight?"

"I am better now, thank you. Tell me, is your schedule free this coming Saturday evening?"

Will huffs into the receiver. There's the sound of crinkling, then a chorus of barks and woofs. Hannibal assumes that Will has just opened a bag of treats. "No. Is there another opera I should be worried about?"

Hannibal laughs and takes a small sip of wine. "No, do not worry about that. But I would like to invite you to a dinner party I am hosting. It will be a small affair, only a few acquaintances. Jack Crawford and his wife will be there, along with Alana Bloom and a few friends of mine from my time as a surgeon. Would you consider coming? I am…eager for you to dine at my table. Cooking for my friends is something I greatly enjoy."

There's a pause. The sound of crunching in the distance, then Will letting out a muttered curse before blowing air into the phone once more. "Fine. I'll come."

Hannibal beams. "Perfect. I don't believe you know how happy you have made me, dear Will."

Will laughs. "You're right, I really don't. Why you are so set on dragging me into social situations, I am not sure, but maybe this weekend will teach you why I stay at home on Saturday nights instead of going out."

“Oh Will, I highly doubt that.”

They spend another thirty minutes on the phone discussing their day. Will’s students are finished with the spring semester, leaving the boy with empty days that he is not sure how to fill. Hannibal subtly confides to Will that he, too, enjoys the outdoors, hoping Will might invite him on a hike or a fishing trip in the future.

When Hannibal goes to sleep that night, it is with a full stomach, a smile, and a mental list of the pigs he needs to hunt in order to provide the necessary meat for his dinner party.

Saturday morning dawns clear and warm. May is one of Hannibal’s favorite months; he never enjoyed the cold as a child. This opinion was certainly not helped by the slaughter of his entire family during a particularly vicious winter—Hannibal still shivers at the memory, can feel the ache in his stomach, can see the blue tips of his fingers and toes, can smell the fresh blood as Mischa was taken from him (and then returned in a bowl, never to leave his body again).

No, Hannibal does not like the cold. He abhors it. If possible, he would move to Cuba and live out the rest of his days loitering on an endless sunny beach—with Will as his sun-kissed husband of course.

Hannibal opens the window in his bedroom to let in the sunlight and warm spring air. He smiles, briefly, at the strangeness of his current situation—reliving a past life, a second chance that Hannibal did not deserve yet still received—before showering and going downstairs to begin preparing for tonight’s meal.

For larger dinner parties, Hannibal hires a competent catering company to assist in the preparation. Tonight’s intimate gathering is small enough that Hannibal feels comfortable in doing all of the preparations and cooking himself.

At half past four, Hannibal recuses himself upstairs for another shower. He combs his hair, puts on his pressed suit—this time a slate gray affair with maroon stripes and a silk floral tie—and sprays himself with a modest amount of cologne. He even exfoliates his lips until they are red and petal-soft.

Hannibal has high hopes for tonight, after all.

Alana is the first guest to arrive. She smiles at Hannibal and gives him a semi-decent bottle of merlot that Hannibal shelves for later—most likely for cooking rather than drinking. He ushers her into the living room where the guests will mingle until dinner is ready.

Jack and Bella Crawford are next. Jack eagerly makes his way inside, sniffing the air with an approving grunt. Bella is slower, each of her steps heavy and weighted. Hannibal watches her wince as Jack takes her jacket and hangs it on a silver hook.

“Welcome,” Hannibal says. “It is wonderful to finally meet you, Bella.”

“And I, you. My husband has nothing but praise for your work as a consultant,” she says.

Hannibal tilts his head downward in an imitation of humility. “You look resplendent this evening. And your perfume is exquisite, similar to the aroma on the air just after lightning strikes. Is it Jar?”

Though Hannibal has no plans to take Bella on as a patient this time around, that doesn’t mean he can’t have some fun. He does so enjoy playing with his food.

“It is,” Bella says, shoulders tight with tension. Jack looks merely amused. “You certainly have a keen nose.”

Hannibal smiles, all teeth. “I have been told such a thing before. In fact, as a young man I was aware that my teacher had stomach cancer even before he did.”

If possible, Bella grows even more tense. She is saved from responding by a knock on the front door. She and Jack walk into the living room, and Hannibal goes to greet his next round of guests. It is not Will, but Hannibal welcomes his old colleagues from Johns Hopkins inside just the same.

Which means Will is the only one not present.

Hannibal glances down at his watch. It is now 6:05. His darling boy is officially late. Such a thing would normally be enough to have someone end up on his table. Will is, of course, ever the exception.

At 6:10, Hannibal begins to pace. He can hear the other guests milling about, enough liquor available in the living room to stave off their empty stomachs.

At 6:30, Hannibal sends Will a text. There is no response, but Hannibal still checks his phone every few seconds, just to be sure.

At 7:00, Hannibal sighs and ushers his guests into the dining room. He calls Will, but there is no response. With a heavy heart, Hannibal brings out the *hors d'oeuvres*. The compliments and praises from his dinner guests flow over him like water rushing over a smooth stone, not a single word sticking in his mind. He pretends to listen to the various conversations, offering the occasional hum or murmur of assent, all the while glancing at the watch on his wrist.

At 7:23, Hannibal fetches the appetizer: a zucchini, corn, and shrimp flatbread.

At 7:57, Hannibal brings out the next course, a grapefruit salad with toasted almonds and feta cheese.

At 8:15, Hannibal excuses himself from the table. He walks to the kitchen, pinches the bridge of his nose, and tries to call Will again. Like before, the call goes straight to voicemail.

It isn’t until 8:34, when Hannibal is finishing his last bite of the main course—the liver of a rather old-fashioned cashier who berated Hannibal for wearing pink—that Hannibal hears the doorbell ring. The sound seems to echo through the dining room, hushing all conversation and leaving a strange tension in the air.

Hannibal forces himself to slowly rise from his chair rather than leap up like he wants. He walks, not runs, to the foyer and carefully opens the door.

Will.

He stands like a fallen angel in the bright light of Hannibal's porch. His hair is wet and dewy, sticking to his forehead like a veil. The shimmer of mist from the billowing spring rain provides a halo-effect around Will's head as the light bends and shifts. His suit is rumpled and covered in dog hair. His shoulders are slumped, his hands are shoved inside of the pockets of his trousers, and his shoes are coated in a thin layer of mud as if he went for a walk about the forest before coming to Hannibal's home.

He is utterly enchanting.

*"Will,"* Hannibal breathes, unable to think of any other word for a moment. "You're here."

"I'm here," he says. He raises up his chin, looks Hannibal straight in the eye.

Hannibal thinks he could be nourished by the sight of Will alone, by the cerulean shade of his irises, the black depths of his pupils, the way his long lashes frame his eyes and cast shadows across the pale skin of his cheeks.

"Please, come in," Hannibal says. He watches Will step inside, smells the scent of blossoming plants and fresh rain intermingling with Will's own natural scent. "We are just finishing our main course. Have you ever tried *fegato alla veneziana*?"

Will stops at the end of the foyer. Pauses so that one foot is in the hallway, the other still on the rug in front of the door. His gaze traces Hannibal's face, searching for something, though Hannibal is unsure what, exactly.

"That's it?" Will asks.

"Whatever do you mean, dear Will?"

Will flushes, shoulders twitching forward. "I show up hours late for a dinner party that has already been rescheduled once because of my absence, and you are asking me if I've ever tried liver before?"

Hannibal beams. "You speak Italian?"

"Do I—" Will abruptly stops his sentence, then mutters out a curse and tugs on his hair. His fingers catch on a wet curl and pull it upwards. It sticks out like a broken spring, coiled and shiny. "Hannibal, you don't seem to be focusing on what is important here."

"What's important," Hannibal says, taking a step closer to Will (so close that he can feel the warmth of Will's breath each time the boy exhales), "is that the person I have been most ardently waiting for is finally here. What's important is that you, my darling Will, have come to my dinner party despite having no desire to do so. What is *important* is you. Always you."

Will is completely flustered. He shifts from one foot to the other, his scent curling with embarrassed pleasure. He clears his throat, then says, “Thanks. I—uh, I really don’t know what to say to that except thank you.”

“Of course, darling. Come, let’s get you fed.”

Hannibal allows himself the liberty of placing his palm at the base of Will’s spine, the narrow space where his hips and abdomen meet. Hannibal can feel Will’s body heat even through the several layers of wet fabric, and he relishes each second of warmth that is granted him until they reach the dining room and Will sits down at his seat—to the right of Hannibal, of course.

“May I introduce Will Graham,” Hannibal announces to the table, pride evident in his voice. There is a chorus of greetings, some more slurred than others. Will squirms in his chair and stares at his empty plate as though the secrets of the universe are somehow hidden within the pewter porcelain.

“Will, it’s so great you could make it tonight!” Alana’s voice rises above the rest, just on the far side of tipsy.

Jack and Bella murmur their assent. Hannibal’s other colleagues stare at Will with something akin to wonder, noting the ill fit of his suit and the messy dampness of his curls. One even goes so far as to sneer at Will’s appearance.

Hannibal immediately adds their name to his *to-be-eaten* list.

“Please, continue,” Hannibal says. The guests go back to eating, those who have finished their main dish instead sipping at their wine as they wait for the next course to be brought out. Hannibal gives Will a smile—something small and private—before grabbing his empty plate and serving him a generous portion of *fegato alla veneziana.*

Will does not speak while he eats, but Hannibal is not upset by the silence. There is an ache inside of him that is soothed merely by the boy’s presence—a longing, a gnawing emptiness that he did not even recognize until Will is there to finally fill it.

“What do you have planned for dessert?” Martha asks. She is a nurse that Hannibal worked with many years ago, someone sharp and clever enough to earn an invitation back to his dinner table.

She is also a devout Catholic, and Hannibal finds it endlessly amusing to watch her consume human flesh outside of her weekly sacrament.

“Pomegranate tart,” Hannibal says. “Will was kind enough to help me perfect my recipe. He has been an unwitting guinea pig to a good many of my dishes.”

“Lucky man,” Jack says, and the rest of the table agrees.

Hannibal smirks and fetches the tart from the kitchen. It is easy enough to serve, one rectangular slice per plate. Hannibal bends down to set one such piece on Will’s plate,

breathing in his musk with a contented sigh as he does so. As soon as all the guests are served and happily eating, Hannibal places a slice on his own dessert plate and bites into the chocolate crust. It is rich but not too sweet, the pomegranate adding enough tartness to balance out the cream and sugar. Hannibal closes his eyes to savor his bite, and when he opens them again, he finds Will staring at his mouth with an almost unnerving intensity.

Hannibal keeps his face devoid of any emotion as he continues eating. Will turns a bright red at being caught before quickly glancing down at his own half-eaten tart and shoving the rest of it inside his mouth.

Once everyone has finished eating, Hannibal leads his dinner guests back into the living room for drinks and light conversation. The fireplace roars, warding away the chill from the rain outside. The room seems lighter somehow, though there is nothing new about Hannibal's lamps or the fire inside of his hearth. Hannibal has to attribute the change, then, to the stellar company of which he now finds himself a part—or rather, one particular person that seems to glow no matter the dour look on their face or the dampness of their clothing.

"How are your dogs?" Hannibal asks Will, drawing the boy closer under the pretense of being unable to hear his voice over the sound of the other guests.

Will stares at Hannibal for a moment, face inscrutable, before saying, "They are all fine. Buster tried to go after a raccoon yesterday, but luckily managed to escape uninjured. The raccoon was twice his size."

"The quarry of a good hunt can sometimes overpower our survival instincts," Hannibal intones. "Do you ever hunt, Will?"

"Just fish." Will tilts his wine glass, swallowing the last few drops. "Do you hunt?"

"Frequently," Hannibal says, grinning. "I am particularly fond of pig."

Alana comes teetering over on her patent pumps, hands barely able to keep a grip on her glass of wine. "Hannibal! This dinner party was simply amazing. I can't remember the last time I enjoyed my evening so much."

Hannibal tilts his head downwards, eyes never leaving Will's face. "Good food and even better company are the ideal way to spend an evening. Did you enjoy yourself, Will?"

"From what little I tried, yes. Apologies for not being here for the earlier courses."

Alana pouts and drains her glass of wine. "What kept you away? You've never been the master of punctuality, but two and a half hours is more than fashionably late."

Will grimaces. He sets down his empty glass and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "I was…lost in thought tonight." He glances up at Hannibal. The light cast from the fire causes the blue of his eyes to turn into a bright teal. "I'm not lost, though. Not anymore."

"Well good," Alana says. She frowns at her own empty glass and tilts it toward Hannibal. "Do you have any beer?"

Hannibal and Will share an amused look. “I do, Alana, but I fear you may find yourself in dire straits tomorrow if you consume any more alcohol.”

Alana begins to giggle, cheeks flushed, eyes shining. She continues giggling as Hannibal helps her into her jacket and herds her toward the front door. Jack and Bella vow to take the poor girl home, and Alana gives Hannibal a slurred promise to pick up her car tomorrow. The rest of Hannibal’s acquaintances shuffle out into the rain, more praises tossed out like party favors as they leave.

Soon, it is just Hannibal and Will.

Exactly as it should be.

“Hannibal,” Will begins. He is sitting on the couch next to Hannibal, both of them sipping coffee while staring into the roaring fire. “I want to apologize again for arriving so late. I know how much you dislike rudeness, and I—”

“Think nothing of it. I am simply happy you arrived at all. Any time spent in your presence is time well-spent. I hope you know that I hold your friendship in the highest regard.”

“I don’t know why. I end up arguing with you one way or another in nearly all of our conversations. I am grumpy and irritable, especially early in the morning. I’m always covered in dog hair. I tend to run late to almost every appointment. I just…don’t know why you would value my friendship over someone else's. Someone like Alana, maybe.”

“Are you jealous of Alana?”

“I didn’t say that,” Will says, bristling. “Just…she seems a better fit for you and your lifestyle.”

“I do not deign to understand the inner workings of your mind. It is one of the many reasons I so enjoy your company. Alana does not challenge me the way you do. No one does. This world is full of dull, insipid creatures. Do not compare yourself to them, Will. You deserve better than that.”

*You deserve everything*, Hannibal thinks.

Will is quiet. Contemplative. He sips on his coffee until the mug is empty, then sets the cup onto the table in front of the couch. He turns to stare at Hannibal, and Hannibal is helpless to do anything but stare back.

Will’s eyes slowly begin to grow heavy-lidded and hazy. His gaze sweeps over Hannibal’s face, starting with his forehead, then moving down his eyes and nose before finally resting on his lips.

“Will,” Hannibal breathes.

Will leans forward, his own mouth sitting so close to Hannibal’s that Hannibal can feel every warm puff of air, every inhale, every stuttered breath. The heat emanating from Will’s skin is

scorching. Hannibal could melt under such heat, could trickle into nothingness beneath the intensity of Will's stare.

Hannibal dares not move, not even an inch. He keeps his own eyes locked on Will's parted lips. They are chapped, bits of skin flaking away from the petal-pink softness beneath. Will's tongue darts out and flicks over his lower lip, wetting it, causing it to shine.

Still, Hannibal does not move.

Slowly, ever-so-slowly, Will bends down and slots their mouths together. Hannibal slips his eyes shut and savors every sensation. After what feels like a lifetime of waiting, he and Will are finally connected.

Hannibal moves his lips, parts them so he can taste Will for himself. Will's mouth is blistering hot, his tongue slippery and wet as it glides against Hannibal's own. Will lets out a low moan. One of his hands reaches up to knot in the hair at the base of Hannibal's neck. Hannibal shifts, moving his own hands up to cradle Will's precious face.

Their kiss is slow. Exploratory. Each slide of their tongues is a caress, each moan a melody. Hannibal's trousers grow tight with his arousal. Though he cannot see anything but Will's endlessly lovely face, Hannibal can smell the change in Will's scent, the way it becomes musky and smoky with his own arousal. Hannibal breathes as deeply as he can, saving the smell of Will in his mind, knowing there is nothing on this earth that could possibly compare, no cologne or perfume or oil that could ever come close to imitating the perfection that is Will's scent when aroused.

"Hannibal," Will groans. His hand tightens, pulls on Hannibal's hair until it is painful. Hannibal's hips jerk at the sudden change. Pleasure-pain explodes down his spine, a bolt of lightning that goes straight to his groin.

Hannibal gives one last, lingering lick into Will's slack mouth before pulling back. His hands are still cupping Will's face. Hannibal traces Will's eyes, noting the way his pupils have swollen until only a thin ring of blue remains. Will's lips are bright red and shining with saliva. There's a pink flush on his cheeks, one that extends down his throat before disappearing into the collar of his shirt. Hannibal aches to undo each button, to see how far the pink stretches—to see if it trails along Will's torso and ends in the redness of his flushed cock.

"I…" Will pauses, breath brushing over Hannibal's sensitive mouth. "That was—"

"Perfect?" Hannibal supplies.

Will's face spreads into a small, shy smile. "Yeah, perfect."

"I am glad we are in agreement," Hannibal sniffs. He raises one of his hands to brush through Will's luscious curls, now completely dry. The hair parts like water across his fingers, smooth and silky. "Would you like to come upstairs?"

Will's smile slips into a frown. "If I went with you, I would never make it back home."

“Is that an issue?”

“Yes. I don’t have a sitter for my dogs.” Will chews on his bottom lip, turning the pink skin white from the pressure. “Could we…can we take this slow? I’m not used to touch. Or any sort of connection with another person, really. I don’t want to rush this.”

“Of course, darling. I never want you to feel uncomfortable with our relationship.”

“And what *is* our relationship?”

Hannibal smiles, lovingly twirls a strand of Will’s silken hair. “I was under the impression we were friends.”

“Friends don’t kiss like that, Hannibal.”

“Hm, I suppose you are right.”

Will scrunches up his eyebrows, an altogether adorable gesture. “*Boyfriend* seems like such a juvenile term. How do you feel about the word partner?”

“Partner,” Hannibal repeats, rolling the term on his tongue, testing out the taste of it. “I like it. Will Graham, my partner.”

Will’s flush deepens. It spreads to the tips of his ears. Hannibal nuzzles beneath Will’s jaw and inhales one last time, savoring the scent of him, fresh and virile and intoxicating. Will laughs. Hannibal can feel the vibrations of the sound through Will’s neck, the skin shivering beneath his lips. He places a kiss at the base of Will’s lovely throat and trails his lips back up so that they are resting under Will’s ear. The skin there is soft and smooth, and Hannibal blows along the skin, delighted when Will's flesh erupts in goosebumps at the sudden change in temperature.

When Hannibal pulls back, Will’s entire face is slack. His eyes remain heavy-lidded as he gazes at Hannibal. “I have to go,” Will repeats.

“Of course. Allow me to walk you to the door.”

Hannibal stands, then holds out a hand for Will to grab. Will’s hand is tentative as it slides along Hannibal’s, their palms grazing and then grasping as Will gets up. Hannibal refuses to move, enjoying—perhaps far too much, but Hannibal has never been one to deny himself pleasure—the way Will’s chest presses against his own now that they are both standing.

With a sigh, Will steps to the side and walks down the hallway. He goes back through the dining room before making his way into the foyer. Hannibal follows behind, reaching for the handle of the front door, but he finds he cannot seem to make himself turn the knob.

“When will I see you again?” Hannibal asks, knowing full well he sounds desperate. He is unable to stop the words tumbling from his mouth regardless.

Will smiles at the question, pleased. “I am going fishing tomorrow afternoon. Would you like to join me?”

Hannibal has to tamp down the explosion of happiness that bursts inside of him at the invitation. “I can think of no greater pleasure.”

They both smile at one another for a moment, not saying a word, neither one moving. It isn’t until Will ducks his head and severs their eye contact that the spell is broken. Hannibal turns the knob and frowns at the cold, wet air that greets him.

“Wait,” he tells Will. He goes to the coat rack behind his door and grabs an umbrella. “I don’t want you to catch a chill,” he says, handing it to Will.

Will stares at the umbrella for a moment before launching himself into Hannibal’s arms. His lips attack Hannibal, teeth nipping at Hannibal’s mouth until he opens it with a low groan. They stand like that in the foyer, door wide open, rain pouring onto Hannibal’s pristine hardwood floors as their bodies intertwine…and Hannibal cannot bring himself to care. Not when his beloved is here in his arms, kissing Hannibal as if the world might end if they are not constantly sharing breath.

It seems both an eternity and a mere second before Will pulls away. Hannibal cannot seem to breathe, every inhale burning his lungs, every exhale a brilliant rush outward that causes his head to spin. Will seems in no better condition, his chest heaving and shaking, his eyes pitch black, his hands twitching by his sides as if he is doing everything in his power not to grab Hannibal and pull him close once more.

Hannibal wishes he would.

“Goodnight, Hannibal,” Will croaks. His voice sounds absolutely wrecked. It causes something primal to rise in Hannibal, his monster preening beneath his person suit at the sound.

*Look at what we did*, it crows. *Look at how wonderfully he trembles*.

Hannibal clears his throat and gives Will a searing look. “Goodnight, darling. I will see you tomorrow.”

Will nods, a short and jerky movement, before spinning around and opening the umbrella. Hannibal watches Will run to his car, each step echoing like a gunshot as his feet slap against the drenched pavement. Will quickly throws himself into his car, shakes out the umbrella, then closes the door. It isn’t until Will’s car is out of sight that Hannibal forces himself to close his front door. He has to fetch three towels just to mop up the mess of rainwater staining his floors, then another towel to dry his feet.

He cannot seem to mind. Not when his breath is still uneven and his lips still tingle from Will’s touch. Not when his mind is narrowed down to the scent of Will still lingering in the foyer, the pocket of warmth that stays despite Will’s departure, the rush of endorphins that Hannibal cannot shake even hours later as he lays in bed.

Hannibal thinks it is the most successful dinner party he has ever hosted. He immediately makes plans for another. Something more intimate. Just Will and Hannibal, alone. Preferably

without clothes. *Yes*, Hannibal thinks, clothing would be highly overrated at their next gathering.

All in all, an extremely successful evening.

# Chapter Six

At half past twelve, Hannibal hears a knock on his front door. He quickly washes his hands, unties his apron, hangs it neatly on the hook inside of his kitchen, then makes his way into the foyer. Alana Bloom stands on the other side of his door, a sheepish expression nearly hidden behind her long, dark hair.

“Alana,” Hannibal greets. “I am glad to see you well today. Have you come to collect your car?”

“Yes.” Alana glances behind Hannibal, delicately sniffs the air. “Do you need any help with making lunch? You know I am always willing to be your sous-chef.”

Hannibal hides a sigh, instead giving Alana a fake warm smile. “I would be honored. Please, come inside.”

Alana walks into the kitchen with ease and scans the scattered ingredients on the counter. There’s diced tomatoes spilled out on a cutting board, a pan filled with crab meat on the stove, and an open bag of basmati rice sitting on the chrome island.

“Crab pilaf?” Alana asks.

“Indeed. I find I am in the mood for seafood today.” Hannibal dons his apron and gestures toward the fridge. “Would you like to start preparing the side?”

“What side are you making?” Alana walks to the fridge and opens it up. A blast of cool air washes over Hannibal. It has the dual effect of cooling both his skin and his mind (which has been agitated the moment Alana walked through the door, interrupting his musings on Will, though it is a line of thought already worn and well-tread).

“Green beans with hazelnuts. The beans are in the produce drawer. The strings must be removed and the stalks snapped in thirds before cooking.”

Alana takes out the green beans and brings them to the counter. She washes them, sets them into a bowl, then begins to snap off the ends and remove the string from along the middle. It’s a slow, methodical process, and Alana falls into the rhythm of it quickly.

“I enjoyed your dinner party last night,” Alana says.

Hannibal hums in agreement, measuring out the proper amount of water for the rice. “I am happy to hear it.”

“I was surprised to see Will. He never seemed the dinner party type.”

“I think you will find our dear Will to be full of surprises.”

Alana pauses in her work and throws a shocked glance at Hannibal. "*Dear* Will? I didn't realize the two of you had grown so…close."

Hannibal purses his lips. Though Will had called their new status a partnership, the darling boy did not specify whether this change in relationship was to be kept secret or not. If it were up to Hannibal, every person in Baltimore—perhaps the entire East Coast, just to be sure—would be well aware that Hannibal and Will were now *partners*. Hannibal doesn't imagine that Will—his shy, introverted darling who would rather spend his time with only dogs for company rather than interact with another human being—has the same inclinations. "I suppose we have," he eventually says. "How long have you known Will?"

"Oh, a few years. We met when he began teaching at the academy. He was always so surly and withdrawn, even then." Alana laughs and plucks a bean in half. "Most of the department learned to keep well away."

"I am assuming you did the opposite?"

"I am not part of the department," Alana says playfully. "Still, through all these years, I've never seen Will so…stable. He's changed, somehow, these past few weeks. There's a confidence that used to lurk beneath his skin. Now he is wearing it like a finely-tailored coat."

Hannibal beams down at his stove. "A wonderful change indeed. His encephalitis was a looming shadow in his mind. Without the shadow, it seems Will is able to see himself clearly for the first time in months. Perhaps years. I could not be more proud of him."

Alana gives Hannibal a contemplative look but remains silent. They both finish preparing their respective dishes. Hannibal hangs his apron once more and offers Alana a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice.

"No thank you," she says. "I'll get out of your hair. Do let me know when you're hosting another dinner. I will never turn down a chance to sample your cooking."

"Of course. Good day, Alana."

Alana smiles, something wan and lukewarm, and leaves. Hannibal listens to her car pull out of the driveway, then packs up the lunch he made. It sits in his warming tote on the passenger seat of his Bentley the entire drive over to Wolf Trap.

Will is outside when Hannibal arrives. Will's cheeks are red from the sun and the restless spring wind that sings of summer. He's wearing a pair of worn jeans and an equally worn flannel, the same shade of blue as his piercing eyes. Will gives Hannibal a shy smile and comes over to help grab the warming tote from the car.

"Darling," Hannibal greets, delighted in the deepening flush that spreads to Will's ears and neck. "I hope your day has been pleasant so far?"

"It's better now," Will admits. He peers up at Hannibal from beneath thick black lashes. The scant two inches between their respective heights suddenly seem like an endless canyon, one

that causes Hannibal's stomach to swoop as he dips lower to place a gentle kiss on Will's pink lips.

Hannibal sighs into the soft touch, endlessly fond of the way Will's chapped mouth moves against his own. They stand like that, locked in an embrace, until one of Will's dogs begins to bark and whine, effectively breaking the moment. Hannibal pulls away—with no little effort—and takes the tote back from Will. They walk together into Will's house, Hannibal heading straight for the kitchen to grab two plates and the necessary cutlery for their meal.

"Alana came to visit this morning," Hannibal says. "She helped prepare our lunch." Hannibal says this specifically to see if Will is jealous, to see what happens if he carefully prods. Hannibal has changed from the last time when he prodded Will—when he prodded him too far, too fast—but he is still Hannibal, after all.

The very act of prodding is written into his bones.

"She left her car at your place last night, right? I'm glad she was feeling up to retrieving it today." A pause, then, "It was nice of her to stay and help with the cooking," Will says, humming. There is no tightness in his body, no outward sign that he is upset by Hannibal's words. To everyone else, he would look completely at ease as he fills two glasses with water.

Hannibal is not everyone else.

He can *smell* the jealousy boiling beneath Will's skin, sharp and stinging. It smells like burning alcohol, like a slice of *sudachi* left to sit on the counter for too long.

Hannibal hides his smirk and finishes setting the table. "Indeed. It was nice to have company whilst cooking, though I wished it were a different set of hands working alongside mine."

Will places the cups onto the table and stares at Hannibal's chin. "I don't think I would make a very competent sous-chef. The dogs know their way around my kitchen better than me."

Hannibal glances down at the seven dogs currently circling the table like a pack of sharks. "Perhaps that is due to a lack of care for your own well-being rather than a lack of skill. Come, I am eager for you to try this pilaf. I was not lying yesterday when I referred to you as my guinea pig."

That gets a smirk from Will. He sits down next to Hannibal and opens the tupperware with the crab pilaf. The smell of seafood and fragrant spices fills the kitchen, wafts through the room and out the open window above the sink.

"That smells amazing," Will says. "Where did you get the crab?"

"There is a fishing boat on the harbor that I frequent, especially during the summer months. They always have fresh crab and trout for sale."

Will nods and scoops up a heaving serving of pilaf onto his plate. The hazelnut green beans are next, and Hannibal is not ashamed at the way his mouth waters from the scent. It is his cooking, after all. He is allowed to appreciate his own talent.

They eat in silence, a near-orgasmic look on Will's face the entire meal. Hannibal's heart has not slowed once since he pulled into Will's driveway. Merely being in the boy's presence is enough to send it racing.

After lunch, they wash Will's dishes by hand, Hannibal drying them and setting them in their respective cabinets. Will's body is a warm, solid presence at Hannibal's side. He can feel each point of contact—the brush of their elbows, the touch of the tips of their fingers as Will hands Hannibal a glass or plate, the slide of one leg against the other—as if it were a brand being burned into his skin.

"How far is the stream?" Hannibal asks. He changes into a pair of hiking boots, much to Will's apparent amusement.

"About a twenty-minute walk from the house. Are you sure you want to join?"

Will is wearing a pair of waders and a camouflage-patterned ball cap. His eyes shine with mirth. A challenge.

"Of course," Hannibal says, resolute. "Shall we?"

Will leads the way, his pack of dogs bounding around them in the tall grass. Winston stays by Will's side, though whether that is because he is the newest stray or the most loyal, Hannibal is not sure.

"Alana was asking me about the nature of our relationship," Hannibal comments. He glances at Will from the side of his eye. "Is our partnership something you wish to keep private?"

Will sighs, bites his bottom lip. "I thought it would be something *you* wanted to keep secret. I am certainly not going to do you any favors in regard to your social status. It wouldn't surprise me if you asked to keep this...*change* to ourselves."

Hannibal frowns and abruptly stops. He turns to face Will, giving the boy his full attention. "We must work on your self-confidence, darling. I would be honored, *delighted* even to show you off to my acquaintances. Their opinions hold little value to me. Yours means the world."

Will flushes a brilliant scarlet and dips his chin. When he finally manages to meet Hannibal's eyes, his gaze turns sharp. Piercing. He searches Hannibal's face, perhaps looking for some sign of deceit or deception. He will find none. Hannibal is being completely honest, no false pretenses or manipulation.

Will's shoulders relax after a moment. "Wow, you really mean that. Okay. I'm…I would like people to know we are together."

Hannibal beams. "You make me so happy."

Will rolls his eyes and clears his throat. "Yeah, uh. You make me happy too." He tugs at the brim of his cap. "We'll see how happy you are once you've been covered in dirt and fish blood."

“As long as you are by my side, I am sure I can weather an entire river's worth of silt and fish.”

Hannibal can smell Will’s embarrassed pleasure. Will clears his throat again and begins walking toward the stream. His fishing pole is slung over his right shoulder, a plastic cooler clutched in his left hand. Hannibal imagines himself five years in the past, imagines what that version of Hannibal would think, knowing that his beloved dressed like he walked straight out of a used sporting goods store and still managed to look like the loveliest thing on the planet.

Besotted, Hannibal continues to follow Will’s lead until they reach the stream. It is wider than Hannibal expected, the other side of the shore nearly fifty feet away, separated by a surge of crystal clear water.

“Beautiful,” Hannibal remarks. “I imagine this particular spot has provided a much-needed space to wash away the killers that swarm your mind.”

“It is. Where do you go when you need to find peace of mind?” Will asks. He sets his pole and cooler on the ground and adjusts the strap of his waders. “I’m sure having psychopaths and neurotics constantly filling your mind is no more comfortable than my killers.”

His clever mongoose. “I have a Mind Palace,” Hannibal says. “Are you aware of the term?”

“For storing memories?” Will asks. He threads a bright red lure onto his hook and steps into the rushing water. “I’ve heard of it. I have an eidetic memory; my mind latches on to every word and image I’ve ever experienced, whether I want it to or not.”

Will snaps his pole back, then sends the line arcing through the air. The tiny hook hidden in the lure flashes silver in the sunlight before landing with a light *plop* into the water.

“Are there many memories you wish to forget, Will?”

Will snorts and scratches at his chin, his other hand holding tightly to his fishing rod. “As much as anyone else, I suspect. What about you, Hannibal? Are there memories you’ve locked behind certain doors of your Mind Palace?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says. He does not hesitate to answer. He wants Will to trust him, to *see* him. That means opening himself up to vulnerability. It is an uncomfortable sensation. He feels like a turtle lying belly up as he exposes the softest parts of himself to the world.

Will looks at Hannibal, eyes gentle. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“Not today,” Hannibal agrees. “But one day, I would like to share.”

Will smiles, and the sight of it causes something to blossom inside of Hannibal. A sensation he once thought shriveled and dormant, never to be unfurled.

It feels like hope.

Will continues to fish for another hour. Hannibal finds a smooth, flat rock near the shore to sit on. The dogs come to either lay or sit by Hannibal's side; every now and then, one will dart up and lap at the water for a moment before coming back to Hannibal, muzzle wet and fur shining in the sunlight.

Their walk back to the house is slow and meandering.

"Impressive," Hannibal tells Will. He gestures to the cooler now stocked with three blue catfish. "Do you freeze any fish that is not immediately cooked?"

"Yes. Frozen fish keeps for months, sometimes years if stored properly. I'll use it to feed the dogs once the freezer gets too full." Will licks his lips, then asks, "Are you staying for dinner?"

Hannibal is taken aback by the question. He assumed Will, his darling introvert, would be more than ready to kick Hannibal out the front door once they returned. The tentative question makes Hannibal burn with want.

"I would love to," Hannibal says. "Perhaps I can help you prepare the fish? You did promise me I would end up covered in fish blood by the end of this."

Will laughs and opens the door, allowing all seven of his dogs to rush inside before he goes to the kitchen and sets down his cooler. His fishing rod is left on the front porch. "I did, didn't I? I suppose honesty is the key to any relationship." Will glances at Hannibal's shirt. "Do you have anything else to wear? I would hate for you to ruin your top."

Hannibal smirks. "Never fear, Will. I have not once stained a shirt while preparing dinner."

Will snorts and takes off his baseball cap, runs a hand through his mussed curls. "There's a first time for everything. Let's hope your luck holds out. I *do* own an apron, you know."

"I shall borrow it, then. I am rather fond of this shirt."

Will laughs, the sound of it curling in the air like warm wood smoke.

Dinner is a wondrous thing. Will is a patient teacher, instructing Hannibal exactly how to hold the filet knife, where to cut, which way to tug at the fish bones in order to best remove the meat. Will's body is a constant warmth behind him, a solid presence Hannibal never wants to be without. By the time the fish is sizzling in the oven, Hannibal is aroused and aching, desperate to touch Will in any way that he can.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs. He leans down and kisses along Will's throat, tasting river water and sweat, a heady combination.

Will moans and threads his fingers through Hannibal's hair. It breaks the styling, removes the gel that Hannibal carefully combed into his strands hours earlier. Hannibal cannot find it within himself to care. He continues placing open-mouthed kisses along Will's neck until he reaches Will's collarbone. With one last, lingering suck, he removes his mouth, eyes trailing back up to Will's face.

Will's pupils are blown. Black as tar. His mouth is slack, parted. A lovely flush shades his high cheekbones, covers the tips of his ears.

"Darling," Hannibal whispers. He presses this thumb to Will's bottom lip, watching with half-lidded eyes as Will's pink tongue darts out to lick at the pad of his finger.

Just then, the oven gives a shrill beep. Will jumps, jerks away from Hannibal's touch. His scent fills the air, musky and spiced. Hannibal breathes deeply as Will curses and removes the fish from the oven.

After dinner, they continue where they left off, sitting side by side on Will's sunken-in couch. They never go further than kissing—even though Hannibal would be willing to give up his soul (if he has one) to press his skin against Will's, to see Will bared to him, to trace his tongue along Will's abdomen and suck his shaft until it spills into Hannibal's eager stomach.

When they pull away to breathe, Hannibal asks, "Will I see you again soon?" It's an echo of last night, but the sentiment holds true regardless.

Will smirks and licks his swollen lips. "Desperate, are we, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal groans at Will's teasing tone. "You undo me, Will."

"A hard thing to do, with someone wound as tight as yourself."

Will sits back—further away from Hannibal, a near unbearable loss—and regards Hannibal with mercurial blue eyes. "The new school term starts in a week. I'll need to write up my lesson plans. Summer students are always more…aggressive than those who meet in the fall and spring."

"The dogs will surely mourn your return to the academy."

Will laughs. "If I give them enough peanut butter, they seem to forget the loss pretty quickly."

"Will you also be returning to Jack as well?"

Silence. It hangs, heavy, where only moments ago there had been lightness and levity. Hannibal almost regrets asking the question, but his curiosity demands to be satisfied.

"Yes, I suppose so," Will eventually responds. "I haven't had anymore…symptoms since my panic attack in North Carolina. No hallucinations. No fever. Only a few nightmares, and those are an old friend, something I carried with me long before the encephalitis. There's no reason I shouldn't return."

"Except encephalitis was only an exacerbation of the problem," Hannibal says. "Jack's work plunges your mind into darkness. Is that truly where you wish to be?"

Will's face shifts, morphs into something unreadable. "Is the darkness really such a bad place to linger?"

Hannibal forgets how to breathe. His chest stutters, stops. His hands clench into fists at his sides. His entire body is a statue, still and unmoving save for the racing of his mind. “I suppose it depends on to whom you pose the question.”

Will hums and stands from the couch. He stretches his neck, letting it pop, then bends down to pet one of the dogs—Zoe, the white one with an overbite and curly fur. “The darkness can be soothing sometimes. Light is blinding; it hurts when you look at it for too long. I’ve never been blinded by the dark.”

Hannibal, for once, is not sure how to respond. He stands from the couch as well, goes to Will’s desk and absentmindedly strokes the feather of a half-formed fishing lure. “Some would say darkness is the ultimate blinder. Plato’s cave was lit with shadows, but the true form of man could only be seen in the light.”

“I’m not in a cave. My mind can dive into darkness and return unscathed. It can dip into light and end up burned. It simply depends on the mind of the person I am empathizing with.”

Hannibal shudders. Inside, he aches. He wishes it were only *his* mind that Will dove into, only *his* mind that Will touched, only *his* mind that Will caressed and absorbed. He is the only one worthy of Will’s empathy. The other killers that Will touches smear his mind with dirty fingerprints like a child with unwashed hands. Hannibal knows how to cradle Will’s brain, how to touch it with gentle hands and appreciate the gift he has been given.

“It is truly incredible how self-aware you are,” Hannibal says. “Even trained psychiatrists cannot read themselves as well as you do. The greatest minds of our time struggle and wrestle with the very question you are able to so eloquently explain.”

Will huffs and rolls his eyes at the praise, but Hannibal can tell the man is pleased. “Flatterer. You can call me crazy. You wouldn’t be the first.”

“No,” Hannibal says. Solemn. “I would never do such a thing.”

“Never is a long time,” Will whispers.

Hannibal walks over and envelopes the younger man. He wraps his arms around Will’s waist and pulls him as close as possible—wishing, as always, that they were closer still. He buries his nose in Will’s rioting curls and breathes in the scent of Will. “Never *is* a long time. Yet my commitment still stands. Your mind is a wonderful, brilliant thing. I would not sully such a gift by calling it *crazy*. Brilliant, yes. Astounding. Incomparable in its depths and abilities. But not crazy.”

Will sniffs and buries his face in Hannibal’s neck. Hannibal can feel the dampness of flowing tears, can smell the salt of them in the air. Hannibal tightens his arms. Clutches to Will as if he might meld their bodies together through sheer force of will.

With one last heaving breath, Will pulls away from Hannibal’s embrace. Hannibal feels cold from the loss, as if a limb has been cut off from his body and then presented to his still-bleeding stump. Blood flows from the wound, taking with it his heat.

“You look as though someone just stole the last bite of your dinner,” Will teases. His eyes are red-rimmed and puffy. The tip of his nose is wet. Will runs the back of his hand over his nose, wiping away the dampness.

“It certainly feels that way,” Hannibal confesses. “I must admit I have grown attached to the feel of you pressed against me.”

Will gives him a watery smile. Hannibal’s heart leaps out of his chest and lands in the boy’s hands. Whether he will crush it or cradle it remains to be seen.

“I will take my leave,” Hannibal says. He walks over to the kitchen and grabs his warming tote before going to the front door. “Enjoy the rest of your weekend, darling.”

Will trails after Hannibal. He opens the driver’s door of Hannibal’s car, a look of shy pleasure on his face when Hannibal coos at him in thanks and presses a kiss to the soft skin of his forehead. It hurts, but Hannibal forces himself to back out of Will’s driveway and pull onto the road. The headlights from the Bentley cut through the darkness of the night. Hannibal wishes Will were there to cut through the darkness of Hannibal’s heart, to dip into the black parts of Hannibal’s mind and revel in the cool comfort he finds.

Will does return to work for Jack; all it takes is Jack’s belief that the Chesapeake Ripper has killed again, and Will is being swept away to a crime scene that has absolutely nothing to do with Hannibal.

“It’s ridiculous,” Will later relays over the phone. “The two killers are not even comparable. Perhaps a few similarities in the way which the crime was committed (which Zeller was more than eager to tell me because the man has a kink for being wrong it seems), but overall, there were far more differences than similitude.”

Hannibal sighs, besotted. He could listen to Will talk about the Ripper from now until the eternities. He is a narcissist, after all, and has no qualms about embracing it. “How are the killers different, darling?”

Will pauses. “Sorry, I didn’t realize I completely took over our conversation with my rant. Are you sure you want me to continue?” There’s an edge to Will’s voice, something Hannibal cannot place. Almost as if he is…teasing? Perhaps Will is flirting with him? Hannibal is not sure why the sudden shift in tone, but he responds with as much ease as ever.

“I could listen to you expound on the subject matter of your grocery list and still be enamored with the sound of your voice.”

“Of course you would. Writing down a grocery list is probably your idea of a fun Friday evening.”

Hannibal chuckles and shifts his phone from one ear to the other. As it is, he is currently in his kitchen putting the finishing touches on a kidney pie he plans to bring to Will tomorrow. “You know me so well. Still, I am eager to hear about your day. Please, continue.”

“Fine. Jason Murray was not killed by the Ripper. This was an organ harvester, probably some medical student desperate to make an extra dollar. There was no art at the crime scene. No…elevation. The Ripper’s canvas of choice is human flesh. This wasn’t a canvas, just a man missing his heart.”

They continue discussing the crime scene. Hannibal praises Will, adoring the way Will becomes flustered at the words of affirmation (of love). Hannibal looks forward to the day that Will is so used to being praised that he merely expects it from Hannibal rather than seems surprised when it happens.

At seven o’clock the next evening, Hannibal drives to Will’s house. He brings with him the kidney pie—the kidneys were unwillingly supplied by an old woman in Hannibal’s prior neighborhood that always let her dogs wander onto Hannibal’s yard to use the bathroom, which would not normally be an issue except the woman refused to clean up after them (which ended in several bushes of dead dahlias and one equally dead body).

“Will,” Hannibal greets. He steps inside the front door, allows himself to be drawn into a soft, sweet kiss. Will’s mouth is warm and tastes of cheap whiskey. Hannibal presses deeper, licking along Will’s bottom lip, delighted when Will moans and clutches harder at his dress shirt.

“Hannibal,” Will eventually responds. When he pulls back, his mouth is red, shining, and his eyes are bright as they trace over Hannibal’s face. “To what do I owe the pleasure? You’re certainly a long way from Baltimore.”

“I brought dinner,” Hannibal says. “And my company, if you’ll have it.”

“Always,” Will says. A vow.

Hannibal grins and walks to the kitchen.

Halfway through dinner, Will gets a call from Jack Crawford.

“Hello?” Will asks.

“Hello, Will.”

Hannibal can hear Crawford’s tinny voice through the phone speaker, despite it being pressed against Will’s ear. Hannibal surreptitiously leans forward in his seat in order to better hear the other end of the conversation.

“Jack,” Will replies. “I'm assuming there must be another body, if you are calling me at this late.”

“Where are you?”

Will gives Hannibal a dry look. “At home. It’s almost nine in the evening. Is something wrong?”

“We have a lead on the Ripper. I think we’ll finally catch the bastard tonight.”

Hannibal manages not to roll his eyes at the ridiculous statement, but only just.

“Oh?” Will drawls.

“I need you here, now. I’ll send the address over text. It’s a mechanic’s garage a few minutes away from the airport, right off of the highway.”

Will sighs. “Is it really necessary that I'm there in-person? I…have company.”

“Will! This is the *Ripper*. Tell your date or whoever the hell you're seeing that there is an emergency at work.”

“Dr. Lecter,” Will says, pretending to cover the phone receiver but speaking loud enough that Jack can clearly hear his voice, “there’s an emergency at work.”

Jack gives a brittle laugh on the other end of the phone. “Dr. Lecter is there? Tell him to come along. Just get here as fast as you can.”

By the time Will sets his phone down on the table, the call has been disconnected. “What do you say, Hannibal. Want to help catch the Ripper?”

Hannibal's eyes are practically sparkling as he responds, “How could I refuse?”

The drive to the garage seems to go relatively quickly, despite taking more than an hour. Will and Hannibal chatter about the case, about the viability of organ donors and transplants. Hannibal regales Will with some of his more sordid tales as an emergency doctor, relishing that he does not have to leave out any details or dilute the facts to make them more palatable. Will sees much worse in his own line of work. There is very little that fazes the man.

It’s one of the reasons Hannibal loves him so much.

The garage is large and filled with ambulances, all of which are being serviced. The vehicle they are looking for is not there, however.

Beverly impresses them all with her knowledge of GPS systems and radio frequency tracking. By the time they find their elusive ambulance, Devon Silvestri is elbows-deep inside of his poor patient, a look of nervous concentration etched over his young face.

Jack tries to get Devon to put his hands up, but he refuses, citing the dying patient lying face-down beneath his hands.

“Dr. Lecter!” Jack calls. Hannibal strides over to the ambulance and climbs inside the open door. He surveys Devon’s ‘work’ with no less abhorrence than the last iteration of this scene.

“He was removing the kidney,” Hannibal says. “Poorly. I can reattach it.”

“Do it,” Jack says, voice grave. Determined.

Hannibal had worn one of his older dress shirts in preparation for this very moment; he did not enjoy having to throw out his shirt last time he saved the patient, the blood from the

victim's body so deeply intertwined with the fibers of the shirt material that no amount of dry cleaning could remove the smell of copper and salt.

Hannibal rolls up his sleeves, snaps on a pair of blue nitrile gloves, and inserts his hand into the abominably performed incision. His hands glance along the ascending colon before finding the cut where Devon had attempted to extract the organ. Hannibal places his hand over the right renal vein and stems the tide of blood pouring out with each palpitation of the victim's heart.

"Do you have it?" Jack asks, gun cocked and pointed at Devon's terrified face.

"I've got it."

Devon removes his incompetent hands from the body and slides out of the ambulance. Hannibal remains behind, fingers pressed tightly to the vein. He looks over his shoulder and sees Will, standing, staring at him from behind the ambulance. The light from the vehicle glances off of Will's glasses, obscuring Hannibal's view of Will's blue eyes. Hannibal wonders what they look like, if they are wide with surprise or narrowed with suspicion or perhaps half-closed and tired.

Hannibal sniffs the air and is immediately struck with the smell of arousal.

Oh.

Oh, Will *likes* this.

Hannibal rolls his shoulders, attempts to fight down the rising tide of his own arousal. He has no idea what it is about the particular situation that has Will so excited—whether it's the blood on Hannibal's hands or the fact that Hannibal is saving a life or merely Hannibal in general (Hannibal desperately hopes it is either the first or last of those three options). Either way, Hannibal intends to savor this moment and the unique opportunity it provides.

While Jack and his crew are shoving Devon into the back of a squad car, Hannibal reaches over and selects a tapered needle as well as some monofilament sutures used in closing internal soft tissue wounds. Both are sitting on a small metal cart in the back of the ambulance. Normally, this type of surgical work would be done laparoscopically. As Hannibal has no such instruments at his disposal, he proceeds to work the old-fashioned route, relying on his excellent vision and steady heads to complete the procedure. He is more than confident in his task as he quickly sutures closed the vein and then stitches the incision so that Devon's victim is more-or-less whole.

When Hannibal looks up again, Will is still standing by the ambulance, though he has meandered closer to the open door. His hands are shoved into the pockets of his trousers, and his lips are slightly parted, a soft sigh escaping his mouth when Hannibal removes his blood-soaked hands from the wound and takes off his gloves.

"Hannibal." Will's voice is like gravel. Deep and rough. Hannibal shivers at the sound and climbs out of the vehicle.

“Will,” he says.

Will grabs Hannibal’s arm and pulls him over to the abandoned building the ambulance is parked in front of. As soon as they are out of sight from the rest of the people attending the crime scene, Will shoves Hannibal against the brick wall and begins *devouring* his mouth.

There is no softness here, no gentle touches or shy caresses of skin against skin. Will bites at Hannibal’s mouth until it opens, then shoves his tongue inside with enough force that Hannibal feels the strength of it reverberate through his jaw. One of Will’s hands latches onto Hannibal’s hair, tugging it so that his throat is pulled back and exposed. His other hand stays wrapped around Hannibal’s arm, pulling him close until their groins meet, a delicious friction that has sparks flashing behind Hannibal’s eyes.

“God,” Will groans, lapping at Hannibal’s bottom lip as if starved. “Why is it that…you are so…” Will never finishes either of his sentences. Instead, he continues kissing Hannibal’s mouth and grinding down into Hannibal’s erection. There is nothing but roiling heat and spiraling pleasure, nothing but the smell of Will—unbearably aroused—nothing but the taste of Will in his mouth, nothing but the feel of Will’s burning-hot skin pressing against his own as Will pushes him further and further into the cold wall.

Will lets go of Hannibal’s hair and reaches down between their bodies. He palms at Hannibal’s trousers, nimble fingers grasping at Hannibal’s cock through the seam of his pants.

“Will,” Hannibal moans. His eyes are heavy, half-lidded. He looks down at their writhing bodies and can barely contain a whimper at the sight. Will’s brown corduroy pants should not look so attractive—should not look attractive at all—but here they are, Will’s impressive bulge straining against the lined fabric in a way that makes Hannibal’s own groin throb with heat.

Saliva floods his mouth. Hannibal swallows, attempts to control his breathing.

Attempts.

“Will,” Hannibal says, this time while giving a half-hearted push in order to put some space between their bodies. “We should stop. Let me take you back home and—”

Will growls and grips Hannibal’s cock in a vise-like hold. Hannibal hisses and rolls his hips into the pain. “No. This is *mine*. Now.”

Without waiting for a response, Will shoves Hannibal back and pushes him into the wall once more. Their bodies writhe together, Will’s powerful legs keeping Hannibal locked in place as their pleasure spirals higher and higher. They move as one, a sinuous push and pull of their bodies that sends Hannibal reeling from the feel of Will, aching and hard and perfect.

Hannibal nearly cries as he comes, his orgasm is so intense it physically hurts. Wave after wave of ecstasy crashes down his spine. His pants become flooded with his seed. Tears prick the corners of his eyes.

Hannibal has never come so hard in his life.

Will rolls his hips once, twice before stilling against Hannibal's trembling form. Hannibal can smell the burst of salt-laced semen, can feel the warm dampness in the front of Will's corduroy trousers as his seed spills and seeps through the fabric.

"Oh my god…" Will leans down and rests his forehead against Hannibal's neck. His skin is sweat-slicked and hot.

Hannibal smiles and places his hand on the top of Will's messy curls. "That was… unexpected."

Will lets out something that sounds suspiciously like a giggle.

Hannibal's heart leaps and sputters. "Shall I fetch a surgical gown for you to change into? I believe I saw one inside of the ambulance."

"And contaminate the crime scene with my sweat and semen? Yeah, I don't think so."

Hannibal hums and places a delicate kiss against the top of Will's head. "Perhaps it is for the best that we remain in our…soiled pants. Come, let's get you home."

Will pulls away and gives Hannibal a rather adorable, lopsided grin. "Okay. Let's go home."

Will never specifies to which home he is referring. Neither does Hannibal. He simply follows behind as Will leads them back to the Bentley. Will hums as Hannibal drives to Wolf Trap, his scent bursting with warm, honeyed happiness. Despite the seed drying in his pants, despite the uncomfortable sensation of stickiness that accompanies semen stuck in fabric and hair, despite the tiredness in his bones and the grittiness of his eyes from how late the night has gotten, Hannibal cannot remember a time he has ever been happier.

"Stay?" Will asks as soon as Hannibal is parked. "Please."

How could Hannibal ever refuse such a thing?

"Of course," Hannibal murmurs.

Will's answering smile is blinding. Will was right; the light can burn. Hannibal revels in the pain. He will gladly be burned by Will again and again if this is the end result.

# Chapter Seven

Hannibal falls asleep wrapped in Will's arms.

He wakes to a cold, wet snout pressing into his hand.

Slowly, Hannibal opens his bleary eyes.

There's a dog head a mere three inches from his face. Its brown eyes peer into Hannibal's own with a near unnerving intensity. Its name is Buster, Hannibal's tired brain recalls. The small terrier has its paws resting up on the mattress, tail wagging back and forth as it lets out an almost imperceptible whine.

Hannibal sighs, unwilling to move from his current position despite the rather aggressive dog breath being blown into his nose. Will is plastered against Hannibal's back, one of his legs slotted in-between Hannibal's own. The amount of heat radiating from Will's body is enough to send Hannibal shivering with delight.

Will shifts, lets out a low groan. Hannibal shivers for an entirely different reason at the sound. "What time is it?" Will asks. His voice is full of gravel. Rough.

Hannibal reaches out to grab his cellphone. It's precariously perched on the side of Will's bed as the darling boy has no nightstands (yet another item Hannibal must purchase for his beloved—or better yet, he should convince Will to move into a new house with him where all of the furniture is already supplied). Hannibal squints down at the screen before replying, "It is 5:47. There is no need for you to wake now. I can make breakfast if you would like to go back to sleep. Your body could use the rest."

Will melts back into the mattress, arms wrapping around Hannibal's waist and tightening as if *daring* him to leave. "No, stay with me."

"Of course, darling."

Hannibal turns so that he is facing Will. They are both laying on the same pillow, noses nearly touching. Will's breath is warm against his face. It smells infinitely better than the dog that Hannibal had been staring at.

"Hi," Will whispers.

"Hi."

Hannibal allows his eyes to wander, to catalog every detail of this gift he has been given—Will, vulnerable. His face is slack from sleep. There's a tiny trail of dried saliva perched on the corner of his red lips. It fades into his facial hair, brown scruff covering the pale expanse of his skin. His hair is mussed, one side flat from laying against the pillow while the other is a roil of rioting curls. He smells like petrichor and cutting glacial water and musk and *home*.

Will's entire face suddenly scrunches, twists, and he shifts away from Hannibal so that his head is resting on a separate pillow. His hand comes up to cover his mouth as he says, "Oh god, I just remembered your sensitive nose. Let me go brush my teeth."

Will gets up to leave. Hannibal shoots out with his right hand, grasps Will's wrist so that he is unable to pull away.

"Please," Hannibal says. "Stay. Your morning breath is infinitely more welcome than Buster's."

Will laughs and lays back down on his side. "A small consolation, but I'll take it."

"Natural scents do not bother me. Things such as blood and sweat and breath. It is the harsh chemicals that upset my nose more than anything."

"So the fact that I haven't sanitized my kitchen counters in a month is to your benefit, then."

Hannibal isn't sure what shape his face contorts into upon hearing this information, but Will's resulting laughter is more than worth the agony of knowing Will's kitchen has not been properly cleaned in weeks, perhaps months. "There are several wonderful all-natural cleaners I would be more than happy to introduce you to."

"I'm sure you would," Will sniffs, eyes still crinkled with joy. "I suppose if you are going to be staying here more often then it's something I should consider."

Time seems to shift. Melt. The sun rises over the eastern horizon and bathes the room in warm, golden light. Will and Hannibal's breathing becomes synched as they lay beside one another. It is not until Buster jumps onto the bed and nuzzles at Will's neck that the moment is broken and Hannibal is forced to face the day rather than his beloved.

Hannibal stands and goes into the kitchen to begin preparing breakfast while Will lets out the dogs. It's soothing, the way both of their morning routines mesh so perfectly. By the time Hannibal has finished making coffee—Will's coffee grinder is serviceable but nowhere near as luxurious as Hannibal's La Pavoni espresso machine—and plating the omelets, Will has showered and changed into a pair of dark denim jeans and a clean white shirt. Will's curls drip water onto the tile floor as he comes up behind Hannibal and presses against him the same way Will pressed against Hannibal while they slept.

"That smells amazing," Will says, nose dipping into the curve of Hannibal's jaw. "Not that I expected anything less, of course. I might have had to kick you out otherwise."

Hannibal chuckles and sprinkles some freshly-chopped parsley onto both of their plates. "As I would deserve, I'm sure. Do you normally eat breakfast?"

Will snorts and pulls away. He sits at the table with a tired sigh and rolls his shoulders. "Do you even have to ask? The answer to that is a resounding no. I'm lucky if I manage to grab a cup of coffee before I leave for the academy."

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,” Hannibal chides—gently, of course, as he could never be truly angry at Will (not even if Will cut out Hannibal’s heart and left him to bleed on the kitchen floor). “I am more than happy to provide you with what you need.”

Will’s scent bursts with honeyed pleasure.

They eat in silence. The only sounds are the scraping of a fork or knife against ceramic and the occasional whine of one of Will’s dogs.

Hannibal leaves Wolf Trap with a smile and an overwhelming sense of rightness. That sense is quickly burst when meeting with Franklyn later in the afternoon.

“I have a lot of respect for you and what you do,” Franklyn says.

Obviously the man does not truly understand the meaning of the word respect, otherwise he would not be following Hannibal around Baltimore like a baby duckling in search of its mother; Hannibal is no mother, and Franklyn will end up with broken wings before too long.

“Since I can’t be your friend, or you’re not comfortable with that, I found myself looking at my friends through your eyes. Imagining what you’d say about them. What your diagnosis would be.”

Hannibal imagines Franklyn’s large neck framed in his hands, imagines the titillating satisfaction of snapping it to the side, severing the spinal cord. It is an immensely pleasurable image, one that Hannibal clings to during his conversation.

“Who are you psychoanalyzing?” Hannibal asks, well aware of the answer.

“My friend Tobias.”

These types of conversations are no fun when Hannibal knows the outcome. The entire appeal behind his manipulations is that he is never entirely sure how they will turn out. Here, the rest of Hannibal’s time with Franklyn plays out in front of him, a full-color film that ends in the deep crimson of spilled blood.

“I Googled psychopaths,” Franklyn continues, unaware as ever as to what Hannibal is truly thinking. “Went down the checklist and was a little surprised how many boxes I checked.”

By the time Franklyn leaves Hannibal’s office, Hannibal is mentally drained. He pours himself a small glass of wine and enjoys each and every sip before packing up and leaving for the night.

Hannibal rolls down the windows of his car as he drives home. The night is pleasant, full of the sound of chirping insects and the smell of distant seawater. He breathes in deeply, content in a way he does not remember ever being.

Hannibal feels as though he is at another crossroads. Before, it was a pleasant diversion to send Will into Tobias’s waiting arms. To see what the man would do when trapped in the lair of another killer. Now, Hannibal would rather cut off his own arm than deliberately send Will into a dangerous situation.

Still, Hannibal is not the only person at play in this delicate match of chess. Jack will send Will looking for Tobias regardless of Hannibal's influence. Tobias will attack no matter if he is cornered in his office or hunted down in some other location.

It is up to Hannibal to make Tobias's capture as low-risk for Will as possible. He is not risking Will's life. Not now. Hannibal was given a second chance.

He doubts he will get a third.

Keeping this in mind—the fact that this life is a second chance is always at the forefront of Hannibal's mind—Hannibal deliberately chooses not to go visit Tobias at his shop, nor does he invite the man over for dinner. Tobias is a weak imitation of what a killer should be, empty in his heart and lashing out at the world because of it. A true artist uses emotion to shape their craft. Tobias's emptiness is to his detriment; his artwork reads desolate because of it.

When Will calls later in the week to describe the scene left by Tobias at the opera house, Hannibal feels a distinct sort of jealousy that sours on his tongue, the juice of a lemon squeezed into an already-gaping wound.

"The killer is serenading someone," Will says over the phone.

"And yet the instrument of choice was unplayable. Mr. Wilson could not produce the right sounds even in death."

"Did you know him?" Will asks. "I know you are a regular patron at the opera."

"I did not know Mr. Wilson personally, but I knew *of* him. His reputation as a trombone player was known by most in my social circle."

"I guess that makes it more likely the killer is part of your circle, then."

"Yes," Hannibal muses, though he does not offer any more information. He does not want Will to find Tobias; let it be some other nameless officer to go catch the man, one whose life has no value or meaning. Not Will. "I look forward to seeing you on Friday."

Will's voice softens. "Me too. Sometimes the thought of seeing you is the only reason I am able to get through my week."

Hannibal clears his throat, grateful Will isn't there to see just how deeply his words have affected Hannibal. With Will's extraordinary empathy, it's possible he already knows even over the phone. Perhaps it's the change in Hannibal's breathing, the way he cleared his throat, the tension vibrating through the receiver. Hannibal imagines Will picking apart each of these clues to realize just how deeply Hannibal is enamored with Will.

"Your words mean more to me than you know," Hannibal settles on saying (rather than the three words that might end this entire endeavor before it's had the chance to properly begin). "Good night, darling."

On Friday, Hannibal settles into the leather chair near his fireplace, sketchpad perched on his knees, a pencil and scalpel both resting on the coffee table at his side. As he begins

sharpening the tip of his pencil, the front door of his house bursts open, bringing with it the smell of summer rain, of Will, of ozone-laced air—like heavy rain clouds before lightning strikes—of…Alana's perfume?

"Will?" Hannibal is instantly on his feet. He meets Will in the foyer, watching as Will tugs off his soaked rain jacket and hangs it on a peg with jerky movements. Will's entire body is rigid, his face flushed with roiling anger. Alana's scent is heaviest on Will's lips.

"Alana Bloom kissed me," Will spits out.

Hannibal sees red. His teeth ache to sink into flesh, to burrow deep into Alana's delicate throat and *rip*. How dare she touch what is his, how dare she sully Will's scent with her own chemical-laced perfume and smeared lipstick, how *dare* she—

"Hannibal?"

Hannibal rolls his shoulders. He tightens the laces of his person suit. He gestures for Will to follow him into the study and then sits back down in his leather armchair.

"I apologize," Hannibal says. He listens to the rain splattering against the window. He takes note of the way the fire pops and crackles as it eats away at the maple logs Hannibal placed inside the metal grate earlier in the evening. He is calmed by the rushing of his heartbeat, the way it spits and sputters just like the flames in the hearth. "Why do you think Alana kissed you?"

Will lets out a harsh laugh and runs a hand through his curls. "Hell if I know. Alana and I have been friends for years; in all that time, we've never been alone in a room together. Not until tonight. It's almost as if, now that I am finally stable and happy, she wants to latch onto that success and partake of it like it's a fine wine I'm doling out to those who come close."

"You once said that Jack is addicted to the smell of success. Perhaps he is not the only one."

"I never thought Alana was the kind of person to be so…"

"So…?"

"Shallow," Will spits out. He finally makes eye contact with Hannibal for the first time since he barreled in through the front door. His eyes are roiling, nearly black. The same color as the sea during a storm, the type of gale that drowns sailors and sirens alike. Hannibal feels as though he is drowning, lost in the depths of Will's gaze.

"I'm sorry," Will says. He looks down. Hannibal frowns and stands from his chair. He walks to where Will is seated on the couch and kneels down in front of the boy.

"Look at me," Hannibal commands.

Will shivers. Slowly, he forces his eyes back up until he is looking once more into Hannibal's face.

"You have nothing to apologize for. Did you ask her to kiss you?"

Will shakes his head no.

“Then it was without consent. A token of affection taken by someone we both trusted.” A pause. Then, “I am pleased you came to me.”

“Where else would I go?”

Hannibal growls. He stands, abruptly, and does the one thing he has been denying himself from the moment he smelled Alana’s touch—her mark, the mark of the beast—on Will’s skin.

He covers Alana’s scent with his own.

It’s a simple thing at first. Hannibal runs his nose along Will’s cheek, from jaw to forehead. He places a lingering kiss over Will’s stubble where Alana’s scent is the most prominent. When Hannibal pulls back, Will’s black eyes follow him.

“Let me have you,” Hannibal whispers. “I ache to touch you. To hold you in my arms.” Hannibal knows it might be too soon. Will and Hannibal have only been in a relationship for a few weeks. But Hannibal has wanted this—*needed* this—since Hannibal saw Will Graham sitting in front of Jack’s desk for the first time, spitting and biting and agonizingly beautiful in his anger. It seems like a lifetime ago; it was a lifetime ago. Hannibal is done waiting.

Now, the only thing keeping Hannibal from Will is Will himself.

Will’s long black lashes flutter. The firelight casts strange patterns over Will’s face, shapes and shadows that Hannibal aches to immortalize with charcoal and parchment.

“I’m not…” Will begins, eyes staring at Hannibal’s chin. “I’ve never…”

“It is okay,” Hannibal soothes. “I understand that this might be your first time with another man. Rest assured, I—”

“No, Hannibal. This isn’t just my first time with another man. This is my first time. Ever.”

Hannibal pauses. Swallows. His cock swells up, pressing insistently against the seam of his trousers. His gaze narrows down into a sliver, a pinpoint, all of it focused on Will’s lips, the shape they make as this latest confession slips from his mouth. A treasure offered up without realization of its value. Hannibal feels a tremor run up his spine. His mouth floods with saliva. He burns. He aches.

Will’s lashes flutter again. He hazards a glance up. His eyes meet Hannibal’s, and Will’s face slackens with understanding. “Oh. Oh, you *like* that.”

Hannibal clears his throat and shifts so that his body is not swaying toward Will (though it desperately aches to, a stalk stretching toward the sunlight in search of nourishment). “I admit I am rather…possessive of you Will. Yes, I like that you have never lain with another. It pleases me that no one has licked the salt from your skin or tasted the cries of pleasure spilling from your tongue. I am ecstatic that I can be your first.”

And last, of course.

Now that Hannibal has Will, he is never letting him go.

“May I have you, Will?”

Will nods. Slowly. Resolutely.

Hannibal lets out his breath and lowers his hand, offering it to Will.

Will takes Hannibal’s proffered hand and stands up from the couch. Hannibal ignores the minute trembling in Will’s palm as he leads the boy upstairs. When they reach the closed door of Hannibal’s bedroom, Hannibal realizes this will be the first time Will has ever been inside.

“There is no compulsion to go any further than you wish,” Hannibal says. He opens the door to his room, then steps inside the familiar blue walls. Will’s eyes wander, sweeping from the mirror that is placed across from the bed to the suit of samurai armor standing sentinel in the corner to the hand-painted mural on the wall next to the empty fireplace. All of it seen in the blink of an eye. Hannibal watches, and waits.

Will takes one step into the room. He glances down at the thick beige carpet. When he looks back up, it is to stare at Hannibal with heavy-lidded eyes.

“I know what I want,” Will says. His lips are a luscious shade of scarlet, made darker by the heavy drapes and low lighting. Hannibal wants to lean down, taste them for himself. He forces his body to remain where it is, to wait until Will gives him permission to be devoured before taking what is his.

“And what is it you want, dear Will?”

Will does not answer. Instead, he raises his palms and lays them flat on Hannibal’s chest. With a single firm shove, Hannibal lands in the middle of his bed; he has to fight against every instinct in his body that orders him to *fight*, to *rebel* against the sudden movement. It is a hind-brain reaction, one Hannibal easily overcomes by staring at his beloved.

Will’s face looks both amused and aroused as he climbs on top of Hannibal. His knees fall to either side of Hannibal's waist. His hands fall to either side of Hannibal’s head. Will leans down and sidles along his neck, skimming his nose against his throat until it rests at the juncture of his mandible and skull.

Hannibal tilts his head back, allows Will better access.

Will lets out a pleased sound and presses his teeth into the spot. There’s a sharp pain, then a flood of endorphins as Will laps at the broken skin. Hannibal keens, unable to stop the jerk of his hips as he grinds into Will above him.

When Will pulls back, his mouth is coated in a thin sheen of blood. It shines, crimson and sweet, along his teeth and lips.

“What do I—I don’t—” Will’s eyes dart from Hannibal’s heavy-lidded eyes to the bite mark he left on Hannibal’s neck to the swell of where their pelvises rock and sway against each other.

“Here,” Hannibal gasps, inflamed and affected in a way he never thought possible. They are still clothed, and yet Hannibal feels unmoored, exposed, a live wire sparking and catching, ready to set flame to the nearest thing it touches.

Hannibal reaches over to his bedside table. He opens the drawer without looking and draws out the glass jar of lubricant, setting it aside for the moment.

“I promise this will be preferable without our clothing,” Hannibal says.

Will snorts and flushes a brilliant shade of maroon. “Thanks, doctor. I don’t know how I ever managed before without your profound advice.”

Hannibal grins and, in a single, graceful movement, flips them so that Will is laying against the mattress and Hannibal is looming above him.

“Hello,” Hannibal says, voice surprisingly gentle.

Will grins back. Hannibal can see the nerves behind it, the anxiety. Slowly, he begins unbuttoning Will’s shirt. Alana’s scent still lingers amongst the fibers, a disease that can only be excised through complete annihilation. As soon as the shirt is unbuttoned, Hannibal throws it to the floor, quickly ridding Will of his undershirt as well.

The pale expanse of Will’s chest and abdomen is just *begging* to be explored with teeth and tongue. Hannibal does not ignore the urge—he never ignores any of his urges, for what is a person except an animal who delights in cruelty—and bends down to taste the long, lean planes of Will’s pectorals. The skin here is soft with a sparse smattering of hair covering the area around Will’s areola. Hannibal tastes this, too, delighted in the sighs Will lets out when Hannibal covers a pert nipple and tugs on it with his teeth.

“*Hannibal*,” Will moans. He threads a hand through Hannibal’s hair. Hannibal rolls his hips into empty air and continues to mouth at Will’s chest until it is covered in a thin sheen of saliva.

“May I?” Hannibal asks, tugging at the zipper of Will’s horrendous trousers.

“*Yes*. Unless I tell you otherwise, the answer is *yes*.”

Hannibal smiles and quickly strips Will of his pants. The boy’s boxers are gray and thin, the same pair he wore when greeting Hannibal in the Minnesota motel room. Hannibal can smell Will’s arousal, his musk. It’s heavy and spiced and unequivocally divine.

With reverent hands, Hannibal peels away Will’s boxers, finally exposing him to Hannibal’s wandering eyes.

Will’s beauty is…unparalleled. Stunning. He is a creature that should be etched in marble and then placed in every museum, every gallery, every hall of every house so that all might look

upon him and weep. In that same vein, Hannibal wishes to cover Will so that every inch of his body is hidden from sight. He is *Hannibal's* to worship, *Hannibal's* to love and cherish, and no other is allowed to see Will like this except him.

"You magnificent thing," Hannibal murmurs, tracing the tip of his finger along the underside of Will's swollen cock. It is relatively large, girthy, with a slight tilt to the left that Hannibal already imagines will press perfectly against his prostate. The head is flushed the same scarlet as Will's cheeks. It leaks a copious amount of precum, and Hannibal leans down to taste it for himself. He moans at that first bitter swipe of tongue, the salty-sweetness of Will sitting inside of Hannibal's mouth to be savored like the delicacy it is.

"Please," Will whimpers. Hannibal peers up at the boy beneath his lashes, aroused at how *wrecked* Will is from just this simple touch. His entire body jerks and stiffens beneath Hannibal, an instrument that Hannibal is learning to be fluent in playing. Hannibal laves at Will's cock for another moment before pulling away to remove his own clothing.

"I want you inside me," Hannibal says. He is naked now, the air cool as it caresses his skin. Hannibal is not ashamed of his body in any way, but even he experiences the occasional doubt. His abdomen is covered with a small stomach, a tiny swell of flesh and tissue that rises above the jut of his sharp hip bones, a symptom of his rich diet and stationary profession. The hair on his chest is thick and curly, shades of gray mixing in with the brown and blond. Though Hannibal knows that he is attractive, that all his lovers in the past have expounded upon his allure and elegance, none of that matters if *Will* does not appreciate him.

Will reaches up and grasps Hannibal's hips with trembling hands. His fingers are firm as they press into the skin near Hannibal's stomach. "God, you're so…"

"So…?" Hannibal asks, reaching for the lubricant. Will's hands remain firmly in place, twin brands that burn in the most delicious way possible.

Will huffs out a laugh as his eyes rove over Hannibal's body. "I doubt your ego needs to be stroked anymore, especially by me. I am sure you are more than well aware of your appeal."

"And yet I find myself desperate for your approval all the same."

Will's eyes soften at the edges. He pets his hands along Hannibal's sides, stroking the internal oblique muscles before tracing his way to Hannibal's linea alba.

"You're beautiful," Will whispers. "Like an ancient king brought to life. Strong. Sure. I feel like I am…safe in your arms."

"You are," Hannibal whispers back, throat clogged with some unnamed emotion—not that the emotion itself is unnameable, per se, only that Hannibal does not wish to give it a label, too fragile for such a thing in this moment. "You are safe with me, Will."

Will lets out a soft keening sound, and Hannibal leans down to lick the shape of it from Will's mouth. They kiss and allow their hands to roam freely, touching and tasting without thought. Eventually, Hannibal opens the lubricant and slicks up two of his fingers. Three would perhaps be wise, but Hannibal wants to *feel* the moment Will splits him open, wants to feel

the burn, wants to ache for days on end, to know that Will sat inside him and filled him up in the most intimate way imaginable.

Hannibal sits up and braces himself on Will's legs. Will's cock, thick and heavy, slides along his backside, smearing a trail of precum. Hannibal reaches behind himself and inserts one of his fingers.

"Are you…" Will's eyes widen as he takes in Hannibal's forearm, the flex and shift of muscle as Hannibal works a second finger inside of himself. "Does it hurt?"

"Not if done properly," Hannibal grunts, scissoring his fingers in a perfunctory manner.

"I won't last long," Will warns. His hands go back to Hannibal's side, holding tightly enough to bruise (Hannibal hopes he bruises, hopes he has the shape of Will's fingers marked into his skin for as long as he lives). "I already feel close just from watching you."

Hannibal preens at the compliment. He removes his fingers with a wet *schlick* and uses the remaining lubricant to cover Will's cock. It shines and glistens, precum dribbling down the side and landing in the curly pubic hair below.

Hannibal moves, kneels so that he is hovering over Will's shaft, a scant few inches between their bodies.

"Please," Will begs. "I need you."

Hannibal shudders at the words before slowly lowering himself onto Will's cock. The feeling is…indescribable.

For the first time in Hannibal's existence, he feels whole.

Will is like the feel of the ocean breeze against his skin, like the smell of blood after a successful hunt, like the taste of fresh meat pressing against his lips. He is every good thing and he is *inside* Hannibal, warming him from his core, filling him up so that all Hannibal can taste and smell and feel is *Will*.

"Fuck!" Will shouts. He throws back his head, the tendons in his neck taut and corded as if etched out of stone. He jerks his hips up, slipping that final inch inside of Hannibal.

Hannibal groans and drops his head so that his chin is resting against his chest. It suddenly seems unbearable, holding up his own weight. It seems unbearable to do anything but lower himself down and grind into Will's throbbing cock. Everything has narrowed down to the singular point of contact where Hannibal's fluttering rim is kissing the coarse hair of Will's pelvis.

Hannibal gives his hips an experimental roll, and both he and Will curse at the spike of pleasure. "Hannibal," Will whines. "I can't—please *move*."

"Yes," Hannibal grits out. "Whatever you wish, it is *yours* darling."

Hannibal rises up, slowly, then sinks back down. His body parts, opens, welcoming Will like a piece of himself has been missing and is only just now returning home. The glide is slick and achingly hot. Will's cock presses against Hannibal's prostate, a steady drag that sends sharp licks of pleasure racing up Hannibal's spine.

It seems as though every moment in Hannibal's life has been leading up to this point. As he undulates and writhes on Will's cock, he cannot think of a place—or person—he would rather be.

"Hannibal, I'm c…close," Will groans. His hips snap up to meet Hannibal, the sound of skin slapping against skin loud in the room, a shot of pleasure in the dark. Hannibal can barely hear it over the racing of his heart. He bends down and licks into Will's open mouth, twining his tongue with Will's. They end up panting against one another after a moment, too consumed in their need to form a proper seal of lip against lip.

Hannibal surprises both of them by coming first. His entire body seizes up, a pleasure so strong it blinds him in delicious ecstasy. Wave after wave of rapture runs through his limbs as he spills onto Will's trembling stomach. Hannibal's orgasm causes his rim to contract around Will's pistoning cock, and with a shout Will is coming too, flooding Hannibal's insides, painting them with his seed.

Hannibal—who is usually so composed during sex, so sure of himself and the pleasure he is taking and receiving, each move planned and choreographed like a waltz—can do nothing but slump against Will's heaving chest. His seed is smeared in between them, hot and tacky. Hannibal cannot bring himself to care, not when it feels as though he might collapse at any moment from the sheer immensity of what they've done.

"Are you okay?" Will asks, breathless. He cards a trembling hand through Hannibal's sweat soaked scalp. "Was I too rough?"

"You were perfect." Hannibal's voice is hoarse. He clears his throat and forces himself to get up. The slide of Will's softened cock from his body is like the amputation of a limb. It leaves him cold. Aching. Empty. Perhaps Hannibal will never feel full again unless Will is inside of him.

As he walks to the bathroom, he can feel Will's spend trickle from his hole and down his thigh. Will's eyes are black and wide when Hannibal returns. Will's finger drops down to touch, gently, against Hannibal's sore rim, as if to feel and know for himself that he was indeed the one to wreck Hannibal so thoroughly.

Hannibal cleans them both with soft strokes of the damp washcloth. He delights in the contentment radiating from Will; if the boy were a cat, Hannibal has no doubts he would be purring in this moment.

When Hannibal slips beneath the cover and draws Will close, he wonders how he ever went without such a thing in his life. He contents himself with knowing that he will never again have to go without.

# Chapter Eight

It has been many months—years, perhaps—since Hannibal has had to use a concealer. The other instances in his past were always due to less pleasant circumstances: a hunt gone wrong, a quarry that proved more wily than Hannibal had anticipated. All natural consequences of his…extracurricular activities. Never before had Hannibal allowed a lover to mark him in such a way. Never before has Hannibal wished he could leave one of the marks on his skin, wished he could show the entire world that he was indeed possessed, owned by a certain blue-eyed angel who grouched when Hannibal left the bed to make coffee and clung to him on his return, pale legs and arms slotted against Hannibal and holding tight as a sessilia clings to the hull of a ship.

"I have to say, I was expecting a turtleneck in June," Will hums, staring at Hannibal in the mirror.

Hannibal scoffs and blends the concealer into the bite mark on his neck. "Even I have my limits, darling. Though I abhor the cold, there is no need to endlessly suffer when products such as this exist."

"Why *do* you own the perfect shade of concealer?" Will drawls. He walks to the clawed tub and rests against the edge, head tilted to the side as he continues to stare.

"A necessary evil. My skin does not always cooperate."

"I'm sure that must be chafing. You are so used to things cooperating as you desire."

Hannibal finishes covering the bite mark on his neck and turns to face Will. "There is always an element of chaos in everything we do. Though I hope for cooperation, it is certainly not the norm."

Will smiles, white teeth flashing beneath the vanity lights. "Chaos keeps things interesting."

Hannibal thinks of blood-soaked tile, of shards and pieces of skull scattered like rice thrown at a wedding, of waking up to a day already-lived. "That it certainly does."

Will leaves for Wolf Trap not long after. His neighbor had once again come to the rescue in watching Will's pack so that Will might spend the night with Hannibal. Hannibal has half a mind to send the boy a gift basket or whatever the teenage-equivalent of such a thing would be, something that would be both appropriate and appreciated. The heart of an ex-lover, perhaps.

The rest of the weekend passes in a blur. Hannibal's usual solitary pursuits—cooking, drawing, murdering—seem…inadequate, somehow. There is a shade of gray cast over the usually lively colors that accompany such artistic endeavors. Hannibal has no illusions that the difference in his enjoyment is due to the absence of his beloved. He doubts any of his previous solitary diversions will be the same now that he has met the boy.

On Wednesday, Hannibal goes to visit Bedelia. Her ever-watchful eyes are immediately drawn to the concealer on Hannibal's neck; Will's bite mark has faded from red to a rather garish shade of green. It does not compliment Hannibal's skin tone at all, though he cannot bring himself to be upset by the bruise, not when it was given by Will in the heat of passion.

Hannibal smirks at Bedelia's stare and steps through the front door. He hangs his suit jacket, rolls his shoulders, then accepts the proffered glass of red wine as he sits down in his usual seat.

"Interesting week?" Bedelia asks.

"Indeed," Hannibal says. "I find myself having many interesting weeks as of late. Will and I's partnership is…different than I expected." Hannibal swirls the glass of wine, breathes deeply, then takes a small sip.

"Your expectations are often concrete. Immovable once poured. Is the shifting of your expectation a crack in the foundation of your relationship?"

"Certainly not. Our relationship is built on a much firmer substance than concrete. A bedrock of diamond, perhaps, if we are to take that metaphor to its proper conclusion."

Bedelia hums and takes a sip of her own wine. "I must say I am surprised, Hannibal. In all our years together, you've never taken a…partner."

Hannibal beams. "I think you will find that Will brings out a great many things in me. Urges I was…not suppressing, necessarily, because the urges did not exist before Will. It is rather Will awakens a passion inside of me that I did not know was capable of growing. I am happy with our time spent together, little that it has been. I feel as if I have known him for more than this lifetime."

"And what is a lifetime, but a collection of memories and experiences?"

"I intend to collect as many memories and experiences of Will as possible. In this lifetime and the next."

"To partners," Bedelia toasts, only somewhat sarcastically.

"To partners," Hannibal agrees with much more enthusiasm.

Hannibal leaves Bedelia's office in much better spirits.

In the end, the decision over what to do about Tobias is made for Hannibal without his consent—and, like most things not planned by Hannibal, it ends with disaster.

Hannibal has his typical session with Franklyn on Thursday. The paunchy man is a mess, hands trembling as he sweats inside his hideous plaid suit, the tips of his fingers leaving streaks of moisture along the leather armrests of the chair where he is sitting. Hannibal's nose twitches, overwhelmed by the scent of anxiety and, beneath that, a frankly alarming amount of cheese.

“It’s him,” Franklyn mutters. He stares at Hannibal with large brown eyes as if begging Hannibal to disagree with the statement. “It’s Tobias. He is the Maestro killer.”

“Why do you believe that?”

Franklyn laughs, but the sound of it is choked-off, swallowed by the tremors in his throat. “I don’t believe it. I know it, Dr. Lecter. Yesterday he showed me a drawing of a new design he had been working on. A different kind of way to restring a harp. And then today—”

Franklyn does not get to finish his sentence. Hannibal’s phone rings, his private cell of which only a handful of people have access to. Hannibal apologizes to Franklyn and then reaches into his pocket and pulls out the device.

Jack Crawford’s name flashes on the screen.

Hannibal stands, walks to the window, then answers the phone. “Hello?”

“Dr. Lecter? We need your help. There’s been another body and…”

“And?” A growing sense of unease makes its home in the pit of Hannibal’s stomach.

“During the investigation, Will left. He saw someone near the crime scene that caught his attention. He only called me *after* leaving the damn building. Claims the man he is following might be the Maestro and says we should bring back-up, just in case.”

Hannibal’s hand clenches the phone so hard that it lets out a small *creak*. “I see. And did any of your team stop or prevent this pursuit from happening? Will is a profiler, not an agent.”

Jack curses and mutters something too quick for Hannibal to catch. Then, “Yes. I tried to tell him over the phone to wait to go inside the suspect’s shop until we arrive. But you know Will, he’s a stubborn thing. He disappeared without us realizing. It wasn’t until Beverly turned to ask him a question that we even realized he had gone. We checked the security footage at the entrance to the theater and saw Will trailing after a gentleman wearing a peacoat, a fedora, and sunglasses.”

“A strange choice of clothing to be sure for the month of June, but why did Will believe this man to be the Maestro?”

“The security cameras have audio footage, too, though the conversation is hard to make out in parts. Will asked the man to stop for a moment to talk. The man claimed he needed to get back to work. Said he owned a chordophone shop in Baltimore. After that, the man left and so did Will. That was…over forty minutes ago.”

Hannibal lets out his own curse and glances over at Franklyn, who is still sitting in the chair, shivering like a shaved lamb. “Send me the address for the shop. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Hannibal hangs up, then shoves the phone back in his pocket.

“Who was that?” Franklyn asks. “Was it the FBI? Did they find the body?”

Hannibal pauses. Stops a few feet from Franklyn's seat. "How do you know about the body?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you! Tobias showed me this drawing of a harp yesterday. It was strange looking, almost as if made of bone rather than wood. Then, in the middle of the night, he left to go *restring* something. At three a.m.! When I asked to go with him, he got upset and told me to stay at home. I thought about our conversation last week and…the whole thing was strange. I followed him. I followed him, Dr. Lecter, and I saw him murder someone at the theater and *turn their body into a harp*."

Franklyn begins sobbing. Great, heaving cries that shake the floor and press on Hannibal's ears like a pounding wave.

"You did not think to tell anyone until now?"

"I didn't know what to do!" Franklyn cries. "I was too scared to say anything when Tobias returned home. I thought that if I told you that you might know what I should do. You always know what to do."

"I must leave," Hannibal says, ignoring Franklyn's praise. He has no need of it; what does a wolf concern itself with the opinions of sheep? "Tobias must be stopped before anyone else is killed." If Tobias has harmed a single hair on Will's stubborn head…

Well, they do not call Hannibal the *Ripper* for nothing.

"I could go with you to Tobias!" Even as he says this, Franklyn's scent oozes fear. "I…I *know* Tobias. This isn't like him. Maybe if I talk to him…"

"No, Franklyn. It is not safe for you to come." Hannibal hides a smirk as an idea blooms in his mind. There may be a way to salvage this situation after all, at least with regard to dealing with his overly-attached patient. "Perhaps Tobias can be swayed away from the darkness, but as your therapist I would never recommend you put yourself in danger for the sake of a friend. I suggest you go home."

Franklyn nods his assent, but Hannibal can tell the idea has been planted. Franklyn is ignorant enough to believe Tobias can be swayed, and foolish enough to think he can be the one to sway him. Hannibal can only hope that Franklyn provides enough of a distraction to Tobias so that Jack and Hannibal can arrive before Will is hurt. After all, as much as Hannibal loathes the man, he cannot fault Tobias's strength; he killed two agents last time and nearly killed Hannibal. Will has no idea what sort of trap he is walking into.

As soon as Franklyn leaves his office—presumably to go find Tobias and guide him to the light—Hannibal texts Jack Crawford and tells the man that his patient knows the Maestro killer, had watched him kill last night. He also tells Jack that he is on his way to the chordophone shop and should arrive shortly.

Heart racing, from adrenaline and fear and the faintest stirrings of excitement that come with a hunt, Hannibal puts his phone back into his pocket and walks outside to his car. He starts it, listens to the purr of the engine, then heads north to Tobias.

Will must be safe. He must be alive. If he is not, Hannibal will personally drag him back from the afterlife so Hannibal can strangle the stubborn boy (and then make love to him, for Hannibal's sadistic tendencies only go so far with regard to Will). It is Hannibal's privilege to decide whether Will lives or dies, not some mediocre killer with an off-tune symphony to play.

Hannibal pulls in front of Tobias's shop at the same time as the cavalry. Jack Crawford emerges from his black SUV with a gun and a grim look on his face. Dozens of other FBI agents swarm the building. Hannibal spies Will's atrocious blue Volvo parked on the other side of the street, innocuous despite what the presence of the empty car means. Franklyn's own Bentley is sandwiched among the rest of the vehicles.

Fortifying himself for what he might find, Hannibal grabs the emergency medical bag he keeps in his car and steps onto the sidewalk. The noise outside is raucous, sirens and shouting and the traffic of hundreds of people driving past with no clue as to the importance of the moment they are stumbling past.

"Stay here," Jack commands Hannibal. "Let the agents assess the situation first. We have no idea what may be inside the building."

Hannibal nods, the picture of a model citizen. He waits for Jack to enter the shop along with most of the agents, then slips inside immediately afterward, flashing his temporary FBI badge to the agent posted to guard the entrance. The agent is far more interested in looking at the vehicles and crowds lining the street than Hannibal, and though Hannibal would normally collect the man's business card for such inattentive behavior, he is grateful for the opportunity it supplies him at this moment.

Inside, the shop is cluttered with instruments and supplies. At the very back of the main level is a plain wooden door. The door is slightly open, a small crack that allows the smell of lye, olive oil, and fresh blood to waft up the steps. Hannibal wrinkles his nose at the combination. From this distance, he cannot tell whose blood has been spilled.

Hannibal pads quietly to the basement door and opens it the rest of the way. He hears shouting, the sound of a gun being fired. The smell of gunpowder and smoke fills the entryway. Hannibal races down the steps and squints at the ensuing darkness, trying to make out the scene of chaos in front of him.

"Get EMS!" Jack Crawford bellows. "Will, can you hear me?"

Hannibal's heart is lodged precariously in his throat. He pushes through the crowd of incompetent agents lining the stairs to find Will, covered in blood, kneeling on the floor of the basement. To Will's right, Franklyn lies in a crumpled heap, neck cleanly snapped to the side. To Will's left, Tobias is groaning as two officers put him into metal cuffs. The man's face is smeared with blood, and there is a bullet wound in his shoulder that is actively trailing crimson across his torso and onto the floor.

"Will," Hannibal breathes. His voice is nearly silent, disappearing in the surrounding bedlam. Still, as though Will sensed his arrival, Will looks up and locks eyes with Hannibal from across the room. A dozen agents stand between them, a dozen more pouring down the steps

to crowd the basement. Through it all, Will never looks away, blue eyes blazing and fierce as Hannibal tries to move forward.

Tobias continues to struggle against his captors, writhing like a fish caught on the end of a hook. He is half-dragged, half-carried up the basement stairs, a trail of blood following in his wake. Hannibal takes advantage of the space left from Tobias's removal and runs to Will's side.

Hannibal immediately traces his eyes over Will, checking for any visible injuries. Will's hands have been deeply cut along the palms, no doubt by Tobias's wire garrote. Will's top lip has been split open. Blood trickles along the sides of his mouth and smears onto his tongue. Otherwise, Will looks unharmed.

"Dr. Lecter, I told you to wait outside!" Jack's booming voice is far away, the distant sound of crashing waves, easy to ignore. "Goddammit. I suppose you can help patch him up until EMS arrives."

Hannibal continues to ignore the man, eyes boring into Will's. He kneels down, feels the blood begin to soak into the fabric of his trousers. He wants to touch Will, caress the line of his jaw, feel the scruff beneath his fingertips, taste the blood on Will's mouth. He does none of these things; Hannibal has no idea if Will has told Jack Crawford of their relationship. He will not ruin it by touching Will in any way other than that of a concerned friend. He—

Will leans forward and kisses Hannibal.

It's short. Closed-mouth. A simple press of lips against lips. When Will pulls back, the cut on his mouth has widened, and blood smears at the corner, nearly black in the low light of the basement.

"Hi," Will says, breathless.

"Hi."

Jack Crawford lets out another volley of curses. Hannibal ignores him, content to breathe in Will's scent—honey-soaked happiness, a sourness that speaks of pain, the lingering bitterness of fear, the spice of arousal and excitement.

Carefully, Hannibal opens his medical bag and begins treating Will's wounds. The gashes on his palms will need stitches. Hannibal wipes away the residual blood and tissue and carefully pulls the torn skin together, securing both cuts with a series of butterfly bandages. He wraps the bandages with gauze, then turns to Will's injured lip.

"It's fine," Will says. "I've had worse."

Hannibal cannot hide the trembling in his voice when he says, "I thought—when I heard the gunshot and smelled blood, I…I thought you had been *killed*. Why did you come here alone?"

Will at least has the good sense to look somewhat ashamed (though not ashamed enough in Hannibal's opinion). "I didn't know if the man I was following was the killer or not. There wasn't time to do anything but get in my car and track him here or else I would have lost him. I *did* call Jack on my way over. Just not…before."

Hannibal grits his teeth and begins cleaning the wound on Will's upper lip. Will jerks back at the sting of alcohol on an open cut, and Hannibal waits for him to settle before continuing his treatment. When Hannibal is finished, Will takes a fresh alcohol wipe from Hannibal's kit and cleans the blood that smeared onto Hannibal's mouth during their brief kiss. The wipe quickly turns from white to pink. Will gently dabs Hannibal's upper lip once more, then places the soiled wipe back into the bag to be thrown away later.

"You find the killers, Will," Hannibal says. He looks at Will, his brilliant, *foolish* beloved, and tries to keep his voice calm. He's not so sure that he succeeds. "You do not catch them. When Jack called and said you had gone to chase after someone, I feared…" Hannibal does not finish the thought, but he does not need to. Will's empathy picks up the dropped thread of his sentence, weaves the rest of it into a coherent idea.

Will's eyes soften. "I can catch the killers too, you know. I worked homicide in New Orleans for six years. Besides, if other agents had gone into the shop before me, they may have been killed."

"Better them than you. I don't care about their lives. I care about *you*."

Before Will can respond, Jack reaches out and grasps Will on the shoulder. "We are going to have to talk about your relationship with Dr. Lecter. For now, I need you to come back to Quantico to give your statement. Good work today, Graham."

Will winces as Jack roughly shakes his shoulder, then visibly relaxes as soon as Agent Crawford steps away.

Yet another tally against the infernal man. One strike is enough to end up in Hannibal's rolodex. Jack has countless tallies stacked against him. One day, Jack Crawford's time will run out. And when that day comes, Hannibal will be there, ready, to collect his due.

"Your hands will need stitches," Hannibal tells Will. "I have the supplies in my medical kit, but this basement is certainly not the place for such a procedure." Hannibal once again is overwhelmed by the smell of lye and olive oil. He glances to the side and sees row after row of human gut hanging out to dry. The smell of it nearly overwhelms the stench of Franklyn's body.

Will looks to Franklyn, still sprawled beside him, and nods his head. "Yeah, I think it's probably best if we leave."

"I'll drive you to Quantico. I doubt you will be able to hold onto a steering wheel for some time."

Will frowns—an inability to drive means a lack of freedom, a lack of agency. Will is not the type to sit idly by while others work. Hannibal can read the insecurities in Will's face (the

fear of being a burden, the fear of being left behind) and falls even more in love with the man.

Hannibal stands, then helps Will to his feet by holding on to Will's elbow. They walk out of the basement side by side, then back to the Bentley. Jack is nearby, talking to the driver of the armored transport van where Tobias has been placed. Hannibal nods to Jack and opens the passenger door of the Bentley for Will.

"Are you going to buckle me in too?" Will huffs.

"If you'd like," Hannibal replies blithely.

Will flushes bright red and mumbles something about *control issues* under his breath. He manages to latch the seatbelt on his own despite the layers of gauze wrapped around his palms.

As soon as Hannibal is behind the wheel, Will asks, "Why did you come to the shop? I doubt Jack needed you to consult on a runaway agent."

"I confess, Jack did not need to call me regardless. I believe it was done more out of a lack of other options than anything. I was with a patient when I received word that you had run off with a presumed serial killer. That patient was Franklyn."

"Franklyn…the man whose neck was snapped by Tobias."

"The very same."

The car is quiet for a moment. Hannibal glances at Will from the corner of his eye, but the man's face is turned toward the window, hidden from Hannibal's view.

"Was Franklyn already there when you and Tobias arrived?" Hannibal asks.

"He arrived at the same time I did. Walked into the shop only a few steps behind me, though I tried to stop him."

Hannibal nods. His office in Baltimore is only a few minutes away from the shop. It makes sense that Franklyn would reach Tobias at the same time as Will. "Did Tobias try to send Franklyn away once you were inside?"

"What is this Hannibal, an interview? I am already going to give my statement to Jack."

"I apologize, darling. I simply wish to know the details of how I almost lost you."

"Come on, that's—it wasn't—"

"Wasn't what?"

"It wasn't like that!"

“No? Am I imagining, then, that the wounds in your palms were from a garotte meant to kill and not something else? Perhaps you slipped on the handrail while strolling down to the basement?”

“Stop, Hannibal. I’m fine. Everything was fine. I…I don’t want to talk about it.”

The rest of the drive to Quantico is made in silence. Hannibal aches to reach over and press a kiss to Will’s face—his lips, his cheeks, his jaw, anywhere that Hannibal can touch—but Hannibal does not think the gesture would be appreciated at the moment.

“Thanks,” Will says, gruff, when Hannibal opens the car door for him. “I can get one of the other agents here to do my stitches. Or go to the hospital.”

“Nonsense. I would not trust your care to another.”

This draws a faint smirk out of Will. Hannibal contains his own smile as he gestures for Will to walk into the building ahead of him. They walk to Jack’s office, which is empty for the moment, and Hannibal stitches Will’s hands with slow, controlled movements until Agent Crawford returns.

“Hello Graham. Dr. Lecter,” Jack greets. He glances at Will’s hands, frowns, then sits behind his desk. “Tobias has been taken into custody. Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“No, Hannibal has everything taken care of,” Will responds. He looks at Hannibal with unblinking blue eyes.

“Yes…*Hannibal*.” Jack says. “Since when have the two of you been in a relationship?”

Hannibal looks to Will, allowing him to guide this conversation.

Will’s shoulders are tense as he says, “We’ve been together for a few weeks now. Hannibal was never my psychiatrist, so there is no breach of professional conduct. In all honesty, it is not anyone’s business that we are in a relationship.”

“Oh?” Jack asks. He crosses his arms over his large chest and leans forward in his seat. “It’s not?”

“Do you interview Beverly about who she is dating? Or Zeller?”

Jack sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Fine. There shouldn’t be an issue with your… relationship. As long as it doesn’t get in the way of work. For *either* of you.”

Hannibal has the sudden urge to bare his teeth at the man. He quells it, forces the feeling down until it sits primly beneath his person suit. “Of course. We would never want to interfere with the FBI’s important work.”

Jack lets out a *humph* and gestures for Will to follow him out of his office. “We’ll be back before too long,” Jack says. “I just need to take Will’s statement.”

Hannibal nods and watches as Will leaves—noting, with satisfaction, that Will's figure has filled out as of late, the swell of his ass deliciously plump inside of his fitted trousers. Trousers that were, up until a mere month ago, pitifully loose around his waist and thighs.

By the time Will returns, Hannibal has made the perimeter of Jack's office no less than seven times. He has cataloged each item in the man's desk, as well as the various entrance and exit points of the room should he ever find himself in need of a quick exit while stuck in this space (highly unlikely, but Hannibal is nothing if not prepared).

"May we leave?" Hannibal asks as soon as Will is standing in the doorway, the picture of politeness.

"Yes. Take some time off, Graham. Get your hands healed. I'm sure we'll be needing you before too long."

Will glares at his shoes and stalks out of the room without a backwards glance. Hannibal gives Jack a placid smile and follows behind, meeting up with Will once they reach the elevator.

"Is there something I can do?" Hannibal asks. "Besides prescribing you some pain medicine and suggesting another tetanus shot. I am…dubious about the sterility of Tobias's garotte."

Will snorts and some of the tension drains from his body. "No. I just want to go home."

"Of course. Allow me to cook some dinner for you."

"As if I would let you leave without feeding me first," Will quips. His pink lips pull up at the corners, and Hannibal does stop himself from leaning down and licking at the seams of the boy's tempting mouth in the middle of the FBI headquarters, but only just.

When they arrive in Wolf Trap, Hannibal tends to Will's dogs as soon as Will is settled on his bed in the living room. He lets the pack outside, joins them in their walk around the perimeter of the property. The walk soothes something inside of Hannibal, something primal that urges him to *protect*, to *shield* what is his. Afterward, Hannibal ushers the dogs back into the house. They roll through the door with lolling tongues and wagging tails, the smell of fresh grass and warm sun wafting from their fur. Hannibal fills their water dishes, makes sure Zoe takes a vitamin for her joints and Winston has swallowed the last of his deworming prescription. Hannibal is finally able to roll up his sleeves and wash his hands in preparation for dinner around four.

Will peers at him from the bed, back resting up against the wall.

"You're good with them," he says, shy. He looks over at his happy pack, the way they easily flit between the living room and kitchen. "The dogs."

"They are your family, therefore they are important to me. It…pleases me, to care for them."

Will's face contorts, shifts into something unreadable. "Are you always this attentive to your partner's pets?"

Hannibal opens the fridge and begins selecting the ingredients for tonight's dinner—shrimp gumbo with homemade cornbread and grilled asparagus. "I would not know." He turns to face Will, looks him directly in the eyes as he says, "I have never had a partner before."

Will flushes. He lifts his hand to his mouth, presumably to bite down on his thumbnail (a nervous gesture Hannibal has grown immensely fond of), then remembers his hands are wrapped in gauze and sets them back by his side. Hannibal smiles and continues gathering the necessary items from Will's (now well-stocked) pantry.

"I've never had a partner, either," Will says. His deep voice easily carries into the kitchen, weaving above his dogs and settling in the room like a heavy blanket. It is…comforting, Hannibal finds. Familiar and warm, the flames of a crackling fire. "Obviously."

"There is nothing obvious about either of our previous relationships, or lack thereof. A mind like yours is meant to be cherished. It would be wasted on others."

"But not you?"

"No," Hannibal says, voice solemn. "Not me."

Will is silent after that, seemingly content to watch as Hannibal shucks the corn, mixes the ingredients for the cornbread, and begins boiling the tomato base for the gumbo. An hour later, the entire house smells of seafood. Nearly all of Will's dogs wait in the kitchen, desperate for a single crumb. Several are trailing drool from their muzzles. Winston is the only one who remains in the living room with Will. He has quickly become Hannibal's favorite.

Hannibal wishes he could never leave Will's side, either.

Hannibal plates their meal, then brings it to the table. Will sighs as he walks into the kitchen, his movements slow and fluid. He plops into one of the chairs and deeply inhales. His eyes are bright, appreciative as they find Hannibal

Because of the stitches on Will's palms—and the subsequent wrapping and bandaging—Will cannot hold his utensils to eat. Even trying to close his fingers around a spoon is enough to cause him to hiss in agony.

"Here," Hannibal says, gentle. "Allow me."

With steady hands, Hannibal dips the offending spoon into the gumbo, then allows the steam to waft for a moment before lifting the proffered food to Will's lips. Will's eyes are mutinous. He stares at Hannibal, no doubt wishing to argue over such treatment, but what else can be done? Unless Will plans on eating exclusively out of a cup for the next week, he will have to accept Hannibal's help, at least in this matter (Hannibal will be more than happy to assist Will's hands in other matters as well, the boy only need ask).

"It will grow cold," Hannibal murmurs, spoon still hovering in the air. Hannibal's gaze never leaves the perfect pink shape of Will's mouth.

“Fine,” Will grits out. He squeezes his eyes shut and lowers his jaw. Slowly, Hannibal guides the spoon into the boy’s mouth. He watches Will chew, swallow. Will’s sun-kissed skin bobs with the movement. Finally, Will opens his eyes once more.

They are black, now, no trace of blue to be seen.

“It’s delicious,” Will says, voice an adorable shade of grudging appreciation.

“Your words fill me with happiness, darling. Would you like some cornbread?”

Will nods, and Hannibal carefully cuts out a piece of bread from the pan. He places the steaming bread onto Will’s plate, slathering it with butter. Will grabs the bread with a shaky hand and brings it to his mouth on his own. A low, throaty groan is Hannibal’s reward. And oh, Hannibal would labor for *years* on a meal if Will would only make that sound again.

The rest of the meal passes much the same. Hannibal alternates between eating his own food and spooning bites of gumbo into Will’s waiting mouth. Once all of the food has been cleared —and the plates and bowls thoroughly licked clean by Will’s eager pack—Hannibal guides Will to the bathroom and helps him to undress.

“I can shower on my own,” Will mutters. “And don’t even think about asking if you can hold my dick while I pee.”

“Another time,” Hannibal replies, allowing a theatrical sigh to leave him. “It was next on my list of ways I wished to strengthen our bond. Right after sharing our used underwear.”

Will lets out a bark of laughter, something sharp and short. He looks at Hannibal with amusement—with unfiltered fondness—and Hannibal feels something melt inside of his chest.

“I will be outside if you do need me, darling.”

Hannibal cannot help placing a delicate kiss to the tip of Will’s nose before he exits the bathroom. The burst of honeyed-pleasured happiness that accompanies the kiss is more than enough to convince Hannibal he will have to keep placing kisses on Will’s unsuspecting nose —the shape and slope of which Hannibal is enamored with, as he is enamored with every part of Will.

Downstairs, Hannibal lets the dogs out one final time for the evening. While they roam, he washes the dishes in the kitchen, humming a nameless tune under his breath, something his mother used to sing to him and Mischa when it was pouring rain and the sound of thunder was so loud he could not hear himself think.

The dogs start to bark. Hannibal frowns, dries his hands, then walks to the front door. He peers outside and sees a familiar Prius in the gravel driveway. The dogs swarm the car as soon as it’s stopped. Alana emerges from the driver’s side with a smile and clicks her tongue in order to create a path amongst the wiggling furry bodies.

Hannibal opens the door.

“Alana,” he greets.

“Oh, Hannibal! I am so glad you’re here. I came as soon as I heard about Will. Is he inside? Is he alright?”

“He is harmed, though healing. His hands required sixteen stitches each.”

“Jesus Christ.” Alana clenches her hands into fists, takes a deep breath through her nose. “I cannot thank you enough for helping him. He’s so vulnerable after a crime scene. His mind so easily picks up the traces left by the killers. At least he had you to mend his hands, if not his head.”

Hannibal frowns at the implication that Will’s head needs mending at all. He stands at the door, blocking the entrance, and opens his mouth to send Alana away.

From behind him, the scent of glacial water and musk grows stronger. From nowhere, Will’s injured hand rests on Hannibal’s shoulder. A wet curl touches the side of his jaw as Will leans against Hannibal.

“Alana,” Will says.

Alana’s jaw drops open. Around her, the dogs break out into another frenzy at the sight of their owner—as if they haven’t spent every minute of the past six hours with Will. Hannibal cannot begrudge them their unfiltered joy; he also feels elated at seeing Will, even when they have only been apart for a mere second.

“Will,” Alana croaks out. “You look…”

Hannibal finally allows himself to turn. Will is standing on the porch wearing nothing but a loose robe. A rather short, loose robe. The bottom hem does not even reach Will’s knees. It displays his beautifully sculpted legs, long and lean and covered in a deliciously dark hair that Hannibal wishes to grip in his fingers as he pounds into the boy.

Hannibal clears his throat and turns back to Alana with a perfectly blank expression. “We were just about to retire for the evening. We are grateful that you came to check on Will, but as you see his recovery is coming along splendidly.”

Alana’s eyes narrow at the word *we*. “You’re staying the night, Hannibal? Does Will need a doctor by his side while he is sleeping?”

“*Will*,” Will says, “can speak for himself. And yes, I need Dr. Lecter by my side while I sleep. I think there have been numerous studies on the benefits of a significant other’s presence and how it helps the healing process.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal agrees, allowing the mirth he feels to color his voice.

Alana’s jaw drops even further. “Significant other?”

Will’s other arm, the one not perched on Hannibal’s shoulder, wraps around Hannibal’s waist, the touch light but unmistakably there. “Hannibal and I have been dating for a few weeks.”

Something dark curls in the pit of Hannibal's gut at Will's possessive behavior. It's not just his touch, but the tone of his voice, the way he leans into Hannibal, the mingling of their scents. Hannibal never expected such a thing from Will, but he would be lying if he said he wasn't pleased by such a display. His monster is a selfish one. It does not like to share.

And Will is its god.

"Goodnight, Alana," Will says, a clear dismissal.

Alana stares for a moment longer. She shuts her jaw with a click and quickly spins on her heel, walking back to her car and pulling out of the driveway without looking back.

"I take it you are still upset about the kiss last week," Hannibal surmises, opening the door wider so the dogs can return inside. "Your possessiveness is a breathtaking thing to behold, darling." Hannibal almost wants to call Alana back just to see what would happen.

Almost.

Will sighs and closes the door behind them. He flops onto his bed and removes the robe to reveal a pair of worn boxers. The robe is tossed carelessly onto the floor. Hannibal picks it up, hangs it on a coat hook beside the front door, then climbs into bed beside Will.

"She always treated me like some fragile thing," Will says. "Her eyes would always be filled with pity more than anything else. I hated it. I wanted to be her equal. Perhaps even something more than a friend." Hannibal tamps down the growl building in his chest at those words, though he knows it is ridiculous to be jealous now. Will is sharing his bed with *Hannibal*, not Alana. There is no need to be upset when he is the clear victor.

"You are not her equal," Hannibal responds. "You are her superior in every sense of the word. Your empathy elevates you. Your exceptional mind is infinitely more clever and unique. Your beauty would make the great painters of old weep with exaltation. There is not a single inch of you that is equal to her in any capacity."

Will, who has been staring at Hannibal for the entirety of his small speech, suddenly lunges across the bed and pushes Hannibal back into the mattress. His mouth is hot and hungry as it slots against Hannibal's, his tongue insistent as it licks its way inside. Hannibal groans into the onslaught and clutches Will's trim hips for balance, unable to do anything but *take*.

Will's bandaged hands rest lightly against the pillow on either side of Hannibal's face. Hannibal kisses Will back for several glorious moments. Then, mindful of Will's injuries, he flips them so that Will is lying on the bed and Hannibal is straddling him. It is the same position they were in last week when Will made love to Hannibal; by the black depths of Will's eyes and the spike of spiced arousal in his scent, Will is clearly thinking the same thing.

"Let me—" Hannibal begins.

"Yes," Will gasps. "Whatever you want, *yes*."

Smirking, Hannibal peels Will's boxers away—and Hannibal truly must buy his darling some new undergarments, his current selection is simply sad and has no business resting against the endless expanse of Will's divine skin—and throws them off the side of the bed.

Hannibal salivates at the sight of Will's lovely cock. The tip of it is red and flushed. It curves against his stomach and smears precum onto his abdomen.

"I have wanted to taste you from the moment we met," Hannibal growls. "Enchanting boy, you have no idea how you torment me."

Will whines and bucks his hips up, cock jerking as another bead of precum wells up out of the slit. Hannibal wastes no time in bending down to lick up the fresh liquid. The sound Will lets out is strangled, loud. It sends a shiver down Hannibal's spine.

Will's taste is…ambrosial. Salty and bitter, with just a hint of sweetness that sends Hannibal immediately searching for more. He licks at the head for another moment before swallowing Will's entire shaft. It is long, longer than Hannibal has ever taken before, and he forces his throat to relax as the swollen head lodges against his gag reflex. Hannibal continues swallowing until his nose reaches Will's curly pubic hair.

Hannibal cannot remember a time when he was so overwhelmed. Will is everywhere, the salty taste of him on Hannibal's tongue, the musky smell of him in Hannibal's throat, the sound of his whines and moans like the most magnificent opera against his ears, the warmth of his skin almost burning Hannibal's fingertips as he clutches Will's hips in a vise-like grip.

"Hannibal, oh *god*." Will's hips jerk. His cock slides another half inch down Hannibal's throat. Hannibal chokes, the sound of it obscene, and allows himself a few more moments to savor the feeling of being totally impaled on Will's cock before the need for oxygen forces Hannibal to release Will. He immediately swallows, desperate for Will's taste to become permanently embedded into his tongue.

"You taste simply *delectable* darling," Hannibal says as soon as his breath returns. "Better than the finest of my creations. I could sup on you morning and eve and still crave *more*."

"It's yours," Will says, breathless. "Everything. Anything. It's yours."

With a low growl, Hannibal swallows Will back down, not stopping until his nose is once again buried against Will's pelvis.

Hannibal teases Will for close to an hour. Each time Hannibal feels the tell-tale tightening of Will's sac, he pulls off of Will's cock and gives small kitten licks to the throbbing head. When the rise and fall of Will's chest finally calms, Hannibal swallows him down again. He massages Will's sac, presses the dry pad of his finger against Will's virginal hole. He grips Will's waist until there are a litany of bruises draped along his side.

It's like this—completely engulfed by Hannibal's mouth and throat, the tip of Hannibal's finger inside of his rim—that Will finally comes. He shouts so loud that the dogs begin to bark, sure there is an intruder in their midst. Warm, bitter seed floods Hannibal's mouth. He savors each and every drop, holding Will inside of him until the boy is shivering from

overstimulation. Only then does Hannibal release Will's softening shaft. He places small kisses along the wet skin, thanking Will for the gift he has given Hannibal in this moment.

"Oh my god, I don't think I've ever come so hard in my life," Will says, elbow thrown over his face as if to protect him from the intensity of his pleasure. "Your mouth is…do you remember when I said you have a clever tongue?"

"Of course, darling," Hannibal replies primly, satisfied with how rough his voice sounds, how utterly *wrecked*. "I have never forgotten a single word of our conversations."

Will pulls his arm off of his face and smirks up at Hannibal. His cheeks are flushed a lovely shade of pink, and his curls are mussed from writhing back and forth on the pillow for so long. "Well, I might have miscalculated just *how* clever. I don't know if I can survive another evening like this."

"Oh, I am sure you can handle much, much more. I will teach you to live in a world of pleasure, take you apart over and over again until you can go days beneath my mouth and hands without spilling."

Will shudders and gestures for Hannibal to come closer. Hannibal takes his time, running his tongue along Will's salt-laced skin, tasting the musk of Will until he finally reaches Will's mouth. He kisses Will, groans when Will slips his tongue inside to taste himself on Hannibal's tongue.

"Can I…" Will says, glancing at the bulge in the front of Hannibal's pants.

"I am fine. Sleep, Will."

Will looks as though he might argue, but his lashes are already fluttering closed, body going lax against the sheets.

"Tomorrow," Will slurs. "Gonna blow your mind."

"You already do, sweet boy. Rest."

Hannibal presses one last kiss to Will's cheek, savoring the smell of him—sated, pleased, endlessly content—before pulling the comforter up over their shoulders. He falls asleep to the sound of Will's breathing, arms wrapped around his beloved.

# Chapter Nine

"Dr. Lecter! I'm so glad to see you. I assume this means that Will isn't dead?"

Hannibal pauses, turns, and allows a small smile to grace his features. "He is not. Though, without the ability to lift his own spoon, I assume that our dear Will wishes that were not the case."

Beverly Katz grins and rolls her eyes. "Yeah, that seems about right. It really means a lot to Jack that you can do this interview. Especially since, you know, Tobias tried to kill your boyfriend."

"Yes, that does put a damper on Tobias's and I's relationship."

Beverly's grin only widens. "I didn't know you were so funny. I would have invited you to join us after work for drinks if I had known what hid beneath all that plaid and paisley."

"Please, there is no need to be hasty."

Hannibal and Beverly share an amused look before the young woman leads him further into the bowels of the BSHCI where Tobias is currently being housed. Hannibal has already taken the liberty of paying off one of the orderlies so that his interview with Tobias is not recorded for Agent Crawford—or for Dr. Chilton. There are a few important questions Hannibal needs answered, and no one else needs to be privy to Tobias's replies.

At the end of the staircase that leads from the main floor to the bottom level where the inmates are held, Beverly pauses. Hannibal pauses too, eyeing the hallway in front of them with a carefully neutral expression. "He's just around the corner," Beverly instructs, nodding to the long stone hall. She hands Hannibal a clipboard with a few sheets of paper attached. The top sheet reads *Witness Interview Form (D)*. "Good luck. I'll be back down in thirty minutes if I don't hear from you."

"Thank you, Ms. Katz."

"See, you are *so* much more fun than Will. So polite. Usually I just get a dirty look in response to any instructions."

"Will is a…complicated individual. No one can fault him for his social anxiety when he is constantly bombarded by foreign emotions, thoughts, and feelings not his own yet forcibly inserted into his mind nonetheless."

"Right, right, now you're just making me feel bad. Thirty minutes, doctor."

Hannibal nods his head, then slips down the hall. The musty air carries the same stale smell as the last time Hannibal had visited. Abel Gideon is asleep—or pretending to be—when Hannibal passes the man's cell. Tobias is residing at the very end, the last cell on the left. He

sits on his thin cot with a bandage wrapped around his missing ear and a placid look in his dark eyes.

“Mr. Budge,” Hannibal greets. He stands in front of the cell’s iron bars, hands lightly clasping the clipboard Beverly handed him, spine set straight. “I am glad to see that you are healing.”

Tobias’s full lips pull back into a sneer. “Are you? I *would* be surprised by the sentiment, but for a man dating the Chesapeake Ripper, I suppose normal is out of the question.”

Hannibal pauses. Recalibrates. His face is frozen; he allows no emotion to show as his eyes trace the line of Tobias’s smug grin. He is clearly pleased at having surprised Hannibal.

“You believe Will Graham is the Chesapeake Ripper,” Hannibal says, a statement rather than a question.

“Surprised, doctor?” Tobias taunts. “*I* wasn’t. There are few who could listen to my serenade. Few who could understand the notes I was playing. I knew of Will Graham’s talents, just not his penchant for sharing those talents with the world. Who would have guessed that the Ripper and the FBI’s bloodhound happen to be one and the same?”

Hannibal is suddenly extremely grateful he had the foresight to turn off the audio recording for this interview.

It is funny the way fate has a penchant for irony. In his previous life, Hannibal did everything in his power to frame Will as the Chesapeake Ripper. Now, he has not placed a single shred of evidence to convince others that Will is guilty, yet here Tobias is with the notion firmly placed in his mind even without any manipulation.

“I do not understand your leap of logic,” Hannibal responds.

“That’s because you’re missing a piece of the puzzle.” Tobias stands, walks to the iron bars lining his cell. He grabs onto two and holds tight, knuckles bulging beneath the force of his hands. Each of his next words are enunciated, slowly and carefully, in order to maximize their impact. “I didn’t kill Franklyn.”

Once again, Hannibal is stunned into silence. His mind scurries down a thousand different stumbling paths as he tries to come up with an appropriate response. If Tobias is telling the truth—and Hannibal can read lies, can smell them on a person’s breath, and Tobias’s scent is nothing but honesty covered in salt-laced blood—then that means Will murdered someone. Snapped their neck and then lied about it to Jack Crawford, the very head of the Behavioral Analysis Unit.

But why would Will do such a thing? Hannibal can only think of two plausible reasons: one, Will’s life was threatened and Franklyn’s death was the only way to save himself; or two, Will’s empathy encompassed Tobias’s mindset so completely that Will actually *became* Tobias for a moment and killed Franklyn in response.

“Not what you expected, is it?” Tobias crows. He sings of victory, as if shocking Hannibal is some sort of feat that deserves a prize. Perhaps an upgraded cell, one that features an actual mattress rather than some springs wrapped in cheap fabric.

Hannibal does not give Tobias the gift of his surprise. Instead, he rolls with the sudden revelation as if it is not cataclysmic in nature. “Will is an agent of the law. I am sure that even you can understand that the law is not without its sacrifices. Franklyn’s loss was a tragedy, yes, but a necessary one. It ended with your apprehension, did it not?”

Tobias tilts back his head and laughs, low and smokey. The sound of it curls through the iron bars, fills the stone walls until all Hannibal can hear is the ringing of Tobias’s laughter in his ears.

“Besides,” Hannibal continues, as if Tobias had not made any sound, “we are here to discuss you, not the person you were serenading.”

The rest of the interview is more in line with how Hannibal imagined it to go. Tobias is uncooperative, refusing to answer most of the FBI-sanctioned questions. He does, however, reveal a previous sociopathy diagnosis from a doctor in Philadelphia. Hannibal scribbles down the name of the psychiatrist, thanks Tobias for his time, and leaves with his person suit pulled as tight as possible without popping a seam.

As Hannibal is walking, the orderly who had turned off the microphones in Tobias’s cell sidles up to him. He nods toward an empty room, one filled with three large cages as though the carnival had passed through and relinquished some of its equipment. Hannibal purses his lips and follows behind, not in the mood for another interview but knowing the alternative—not following the orderly—would be worse in the scheme of things.

“Interesting conversation?” Matthew asks.

Hannibal looks over at Matthew with a blank expression. “Indeed,” he replies.

“I always wondered about the Chesapeake Ripper. Makes sense it would be someone on the inside. Smart move, leading the FBI away from his own kills.”

Hannibal grits his teeth and stares into Matthew’s dull brown eyes. “I see you listened in on my interview. That was rather rude.”

Matthew shrugs, unperturbed. “I am doing you a favor, doc. Seemed the least you could do in return.” As if Hannibal had not paid an outrageous sum for the audio to mysteriously malfunction during Tobias’s interview. Matthew continues, “I’m glad I did, though. I didn’t believe Tobias at first, blabbing on about the Ripper. But you didn’t do much to persuade him otherwise. A little suspicious, don’t you think?”

Hannibal’s mind whirs, spins. He has two options: deny, or try and use Matthew’s erroneous belief that Will is the Ripper against him. Hannibal catalogs the young man, the desperation permeating his scent, the need for approval so clearly evident in his yearning eyes. Hannibal sighs, slowly relaxes as a plan presents itself like a perfectly prepared feast. “You’re right,” he says. “I did not persuade Tobias against the idea, because he was speaking the truth.”

Matthew's face visibly brightens. "I *knew* it. I've had Will Graham on my radar for years."

Hannibal bristles inside. No one as banal as the orderly in front of him should be following Will, even from a distance. Will's brilliance is for Hannibal to bask in, and Hannibal alone.

With a sharp grin, Hannibal asks, "How would you like to meet the Ripper?"

Matthew is instantly more alert. The slouch of his shoulders leaves, and when Matthew stands to his full height, the white fabric of his uniform stretches to reveal a toned body beneath. "What do you mean?" At least Matthew has the sense to sound suspicious. Anyone with even a half-formed brain cell should be wary of meeting the Chesapeake Ripper.

"Tobias is right. The Chesapeake Ripper and I have an…intimate relationship." Hannibal pauses. He ensures Matthew is looking him straight in the eyes as he says, "The Ripper does not tolerate rudeness in any form. If Tobias were to be taken care of, discreetly of course, the Ripper would be most grateful. He would want to reward you for your efforts." Hannibal does not specify what such a reward would be. Instead, he allows the younger man to fill in the gaps, to hear the words he is not saying aloud.

Matthew lets out a low whistle. His eyes look nearly black. "I could do that. Take care of Tobias, that is. People don't suspect you when you look like me." Matthew plucks at his starched collar. "How would I find you afterward?"

Hannibal reaches into his suit pocket and pulls out a business card. "Here. My number is listed on the back. Call me when you have completed your task. Do not contact me otherwise."

Matthew takes the card and slowly tucks it into his uniform. "Are you sure the Ripper would want me to do this?"

"I assure you, the Ripper will be pleased with your efforts. I am sure he would love to have you for dinner."

Matthew beams, revealing the sharp point of his incisors. "I look forward to it."

Hannibal smiles in return. "As do I."

Matthew tilts his head and gestures for Hannibal to leave the room. Hannibal assumes there are no cameras or other recording devices in the space; if there are, he will have to trust Matthew has enough sense to delete the audio and video so that their conversation remains private.

Hannibal leaves Matthew behind as he walks up the steps to the main floor of the BSHCI. He keeps walking until he reaches the foyer, pleased to see Beverly waiting for him unaccompanied by anyone else. Hannibal is in no mood to deal with Frederick Chilton (though is anyone ever in the right frame of mind to spend time with such a man?).

"Ms. Katz," Hannibal greets. He hands her the clipboard with the forms he filled out during his and Tobias's interview. "I will leave this in your capable hands. I am afraid the rest of my

afternoon is spoken for."

"Sure," Beverly says, waving her hand toward the door. "Tell Will we are all thinking of him."

"Of course. I am sure he will appreciate the support."

Hannibal nods at the woman, then leaves the building. He is instantly surrounded by bright sunlight and a heat that sizzles off the pavement in waves. It surrounds him, envelops him like the tongue of a brightly burning flame, and by the time Hannibal reaches his car he is covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

From the corner of his eye, Hannibal spots a sudden burst of crimson. He turns, but there is nothing to see but the BSHCI and a few guests wandering the sun-baked asphalt. Hannibal briefly narrows his eyes before sliding into the driver's seat of his car and pulling out onto the road.

As Hannibal drives to his office, his mind wanders. Though his visit to the BSHCI had not been what Hannibal expected, he finds there is a sense of titillation humming through his veins nonetheless.

Will had killed Franklyn.

Will—who had been removed from the New Orleans police force because of his inability to pull a trigger, the man who would rather be stabbed than end another's life, the man who had (in a previous life) shattered into pieces because he could not handle the thought of becoming a murderer—that very same person had viciously snapped the neck of a harmless, neurotic man.

Hannibal adjusts the seam of his trousers so that his erection is not pressing so insistently against the strained fabric. The ache of his knowledge is sweet, fulfilling, a reminder of just how different this Will has become compared to the one Hannibal knew.

What has changed? What is so different this time that makes it so Will can casually end a life and then effortlessly hide his actions? Is it because Will's brain is not on fire? Is it due to Hannibal's influence? The intimate nature of their relationship?

Hannibal ponders on this as he breezes through his afternoon appointments. He gives each of his patients enough attention to direct their dull problems, not a single scrap more.

When Hannibal arrives at his home, he immediately spots Will's atrocious blue Volvo parked in the driveway. Smiling, Hannibal opens the garage door and walks inside, sighing with relief as a cool breeze drifts over his face from the air conditioning unit.

"Darling," Hannibal calls. "Are you here?"

"In the kitchen!"

Hannibal goes to the kitchen, stopping short when he sees Will. The boy is wearing Hannibal's black apron, the waist tie pulled tight over his narrow hips. The cuffs of his

flannel shirt have been rolled up to reveal strong, lithe forearms. Will's curly hair is slightly stiff, perhaps from gel, and the caramel strands seem to glisten as he moves from one counter to the other, carrying a bowl of minced garlic cloves. It is Will's eyes that give Hannibal pause, though; without his glasses—glasses which Will has not worn once since they began seeing one another—his piercing blue eyes seem to cut even sharper. Hannibal feels flayed open beneath their touch, a single glance enough to rip open the seams of his person suit and leave it, shredded, on the floor.

"What a pleasant surprise," Hannibal says, breathless. He sits on a bar stool and allows his eyes to rove around the various ingredients: fresh trout, minced garlic, two sliced lemons, and a bottle of albariño.

Will smirks and places his injured hands on the countertop, palms up. They are still healing from their encounter with Tobias's garotte; everything but the tips of his fingers are wrapped in white gauze. "You aren't mad that I am desecrating the inner sanctum of your house?"

Hannibal lifts an eyebrow and pours himself a glass of the white wine. "Is that what is happening here? Desecration?"

"Not yet," Will says. It should not be so attractive, the awkward purr in Will's voice, but Hannibal finds himself leaning forward on the counter all the same in order to be even an inch closer to his beloved.

Hannibal forces himself to sit back. He swirls his wine, lifts the glass to his nose, delicately sniffs—noting with pleasure the citrus undercurrents that will pair well with the lemon sauce Will is creating—and sips. "A desecration I am looking forward to, then."

Will's scent bursts with spiced arousal. He hums and continues mincing the last of the garlic, movements awkward and unwieldy as he navigates holding a knife while his palms are lined with stitches. "How was work today?"

"Unexpected. I was petitioned by Ms. Katz to interview Tobias Budge. The Maestro now finds himself in the bowels of the BSHCI."

Will's hand slips on the knife. It falls to the kitchen floor with a clatter, Will cursing before bending down to pick it back up. Hannibal immediately stands and walks around the countertop to assess Will's hands. Though the gauze and stitches are still lining his palms, Will is able to move his fingers without too much pain, hence his insistence on making dinner and doing other chores when Hannibal is more than happy to assist the stubborn boy. The gauze protected his palms from any further injury, the blade of the knife glancing harmlessly over the thick fabric.

Hannibal puts the knife into the sink and washes it while Will cleans his trembling hands.

"Do they hurt?" Hannibal asks.

Will shrugs and dries his fingertips on the towel hanging by the sink. "No more than you would expect." A pause. Then, "I didn't think the BAU would hire you to work on the Maestro case. Wasn't Franklyn your patient?"

“He was. As it so happens, *you* were their first choice to conduct the interview. However, as you are a party to the incident I interviewed Tobias about, it was a conflict of interest to bring you along.”

Hannibal does not mention Tobias’s revelation. He does not say Franklyn’s name, nor bring up any specific part of the interview. If Will wishes to keep the true nature of Franklyn’s death a secret, Hannibal will allow him.

For now.

“I guess the court will need a profile drawn up no matter how much evidence there is against someone. I mean, Tobias had legitimate human intestines hanging from his basement. Hard to argue with that sort of proof. What more good can a profile provide?” There’s a strange gleam in Will’s eye. Manic, almost.

Hannibal slips an arm around Will’s waist and places a gentle kiss against the soft skin of his forehead. “The courts do so love their profiles. But unless you catch someone in the act, evidence is merely that: evidence. However, Tobias’s pride is too much a burden to keep him quiet it would seem. He has confessed to a multitude of murders, not just the two that were claimed by the Maestro.”

“Pride, envy, avarice—these are the sparks have set on fire the hearts of all men.”

Hannibal pauses. Blinks. “Darling, is that Dante I hear spilling from your tongue?”

Will hums and pulls away from Hannibal’s grasp, pouring himself a glass of wine. He looks at Hannibal to smirk and say, “I always knew you were a bad influence.”

Hannibal’s matching smirk is wide, hungry. He aches to gorge himself with Will, devour all that Will gives him and then beg for more. His gluttonous nature has never been so tested as when he is around his beloved.

Hannibal sighs and turns on the speakers tucked discreetly in the corners of his kitchen and dining room. He opens his phone to play the *Goldberg Variations* by Bach. The music flows through Hannibal, a soothing and familiar melody that perfectly encompasses the turmoil of emotions he feels whenever he thinks about Will.

Will, oblivious to the turn of Hannibal’s thoughts, puts the trout into the oven. He begins to clear the countertops and wash any used dishes. At the same time, Hannibal fetches a container of fresh *gai lan* from his refrigerator and begins preparing a salad to go along with their main dish. He and Will exist in the same space, neither talking, the heat passing between their bodies more than enough to convey their feelings and thoughts.

When Hannibal has finished the salad, Will gestures to the oven and says, “The trout should be finished in an hour.”

Hannibal sidles closer to Will and rests his hands on either side of Will’s head so that the boy is pinned against the wall. “Whatever shall we do to fill the time?’

Will stares at Hannibal's lips. "I have a few ideas."

Will tilts his neck up to kiss Hannibal. The kiss is soft, gentle. Will tastes of sour pomegranates and ripe apricots and the lingering burn of alcohol. His lips meld against Hannibal's, and Hannibal finds himself wrapping his arm around Will's trim waist to draw him closer.

When Will pulls back, it is with dark eyes and red, swollen lips. He looks at Hannibal and smiles, amused. "Do you often kiss people in your kitchen? I thought this would be a sacred space for you."

"It is," Hannibal growls. He leans down and nips at Will's jaw, delighted at the feel of sharp stubble against his sensitive mouth. "And what better way to sanctify a space than through worship?" Hannibal punctuates this statement with another bite, this one along Will's neck.

Will whines and leans back so that he is completely resting against the wall, throat exposed to Hannibal's sharp teeth.

"Go ahead," Will says, breathless. "Who am I to keep you from worshiping?"

Hannibal nearly loses himself at those words. He groans, closes his eyes for a brief moment in order to gather the tattered shreds of his self-control, then bends down to continue biting and licking along Will's neck. The skin there is dewy, covered in a fine sheen of sweat. Hannibal licks away the salt and swallows it to try and sate his endlessly empty stomach.

"Delicious," he says. "Simply divine."

Will rolls his hips, the bulge of his clothed erection rubbing against Hannibal's own. "Am I your *amuse-bouche*?"

Hannibal licks a stripe from Will's collarbone up to his mandible. "Indeed," Hannibal says. "Savory yet succulent. The perfect start to our meal."

For the next hour, Hannibal simply…enjoys. The taste of Will's skin beneath his lips and tongue. The feel of Will's sharp hips beneath his fingertips. The sound of Will's breathless moans and sighs in his ears. By the time the oven time goes off, Will's entire throat—and parts of his shoulders—are covered in bite marks and bruises.

"Quid pro quo," Hannibal remarks, nodding at the covered flesh. "I would offer my concealer, but I'm afraid the shade would be far too dark for your porcelain skin."

Will huffs and rolls his eyes. He grabs the oven mitts from one of the kitchen drawers and slides the trout out of the oven and onto the stove to cool. He winces as soon as he releases the tray, slipping off the mitts and checking to see if any of his stitches have popped from the movement. Hannibal watches this all with shrewd eyes; though Will's independence is important, Will's health is even more so. Hannibal will not allow the boy to permanently injure himself in the name of self-sufficiency.

“Lucky for me,” Will says, poking at the fish with a fork, “I don’t have anywhere to be for at least another week. My sick days have been piling up for years. The academy actually called me to ensure the request I put in for time off wasn’t a mistake. The secretary was sure the infamous Professor Graham couldn’t *actually* care about something like his health and take time away from work.” Will’s voice sours, becomes bitter.

Hannibal immediately tries to lift the mood. “Grading without the use of your hands would surely be nie impossible.”

“It’s the excuse I’m making in order not to assign any more work for the rest of the semester,” Will agrees. “I don’t know who is more excited by the prospect: me, or my students.”

Hannibal smiles and helps move the fish to a fresh platter. Once done, he grabs two plates and two sets of silverware and follows Will into the dining room. Together, they set the table, Hannibal returning to the kitchen one last time to fetch the albariño.

Will describes his day to Hannibal while they eat. Hannibal is distracted by Will’s throat and the copious marks covering it. Will notices Hannibal’s wandering eyes, and his scent floods with embarrassed pleasure, honey-sweet and spiced. Hannibal quickly finishes his meal—though still savoring every bite, for Hannibal is nothing if not a hedonist—before leading Will upstairs to finish what they started.

Hannibal caresses the apron strap around Will’s waist before untying the knot in the back and gently placing the apron on the floor. The black fabric smells of Will now—sweat and pleasure and sun-kissed skin. Hannibal doubts he will ever want to wash it again. Will watches with an amused expression as Hannibal slowly removes the rest of his clothing. Each layer is peeled away with careful, caressing hands, a god disrobed by its supplicant.

“I thought you’d be more eager to get my clothes off,” Will remarks. He stretches, naked, in Hannibal’s bed, strong legs flexing as his toes point towards the edge of the mattress.

“I am savoring,” Hannibal responds, eyes never leaving Will’s exposed skin. He reaches down and traces the line of hair that begins at Will’s stomach and ends at his groin. Hannibal continues touching the hair for a moment before asking, apropos of nothing, “May I rim you?”

Will lets out a spluttered curse and immediately sits up in the bed, back resting against the headboard. “What?”

“I want to taste you,” Hannibal admits. “There does not have to be any sort of penetration if that would make you feel uncomfortable.”

Will’s face is a sinful shade of scarlet. He looks at Hannibal with squinted eyes, lets his gaze roam over Hannibal’s clothed body before finally returning to his face. “I’ve never…isn’t that unsanitary?”

“I assure you it is not,” Hannibal sniffs. He opens the top button of his waistcoat and is rewarded with Will batting away his fingers so that he can take off the article of clothing

himself. “I find myself wanting to taste every inch of you, inside and out.”

Will shudders and throws the waistcoat to the floor, working on the buttons of Hannibal’s dress shirt next. “Every inch, huh? Even the inside? Perhaps have a taste of my colon and kidneys?”

It is only due to Hannibal’s exquisite self-control—built up from years and years of practice and experience—that Hannibal does not shiver and moan at the words leaving Will’s mouth. Instead, Hannibal merely smiles, something indulgent, and lets Will remove his shirt. As Will is unzipping his slacks, Hannibal says, “Whatever you allow me, I will take. I am…selfish in my desire for you, darling.”

Will peers up at Hannibal with half-lidded eyes and grips Hannibal’s shaft inside of his briefs. His fingers are firm. Unyielding. Dangerous. Hannibal aching cock leaks a generous amount of precum, soaking the black material of his silky briefs. Hannibal shudders at the thought of it rubbing into the gauze of Will’s palms so that everything Will touches smells of his seed.

“You’re not the only selfish one,” Will says, voice so low it is nearly silent. Without waiting for a response, Will tears Hannibal’s briefs off—quite literally, the material splits in half beneath Will’s seeking fingers (and the image should not be as arousing as it is)—throws the tatters to the side, then covers the head of Hannibal’s cock with his mouth.

It’s a delicious, burning heat, one Hannibal never wishes to part from again.

“Will!” Hannibal shouts. He threads his hands in Will’s curls. Will chokes on Hannibal’s shaft, not even half of the entire length in his mouth. He pulls back, saliva dripping from the corners of his lips, then slides back down again.

Hannibal is helpless save to tug and pull Will’s hair to keep the boy from gagging. Will seems intent on impaling himself on Hannibal’s cock despite his obvious lack of experience. He gags, chokes, coughs, then continues sucking until Hannibal’s eyes roll back in his head, and it is all he can do to keep himself from orgasming too soon.

“Will,” Hannibal pleads. “Darling, let me—”

Will pulls off with a wet *pop* and says, voice like gravel, “If you’re still talking, I’m clearly doing something wrong.”

Hannibal whines as Will resumes his efforts. He gently pulls back Hannibal’s foreskin—fingers stiff and awkward from his injured hands—to reveal the glistening, swollen head of Hannibal’s cock, then licks along the slit. His tongue darts inside to lap up the beading precum and Hannibal is gone. He shouts, tugs Will’s hair so tightly he wouldn’t be surprised if it was pulled up by the root, and floods Will’s mouth with his spend. Will splutters and coughs, but instead of pulling away, the stubborn boy places the tip of Hannibal’s shaft back between his lips and *sucks*, wrenching Hannibal’s orgasm from the depths of his very soul. When Will finally releases Hannibal’s soft cock, it is with swollen, spit-slick lips, dark eyes, and an extremely smug expression.

Hannibal would say something, anything, but he is too busy slowing his heart rate so that he is not in imminent danger of suffering cardiopulmonary arrest.

When his pulse has slowed enough that Hannibal does not fear syncope, he flips Will onto his stomach and rims the boy until he is a screaming, writhing mess beneath Hannibal's tongue. Will's taste is stronger here, more concentrated. Hannibal eagerly laps up each drop of sweat that drips down Will's spine and into his crease. Hannibal's spent cock rallies at the taste of Will on his tongue, and Hannibal surprises himself by coming a second time with his tongue deep inside of Will and the sound of Will's cries filling the air.

As they lay in bed afterward, coated in sweat and sated, Hannibal cards his fingertips through Will's wild curls and asks, "Are you returning to work for our dear Uncle Jack? I asked you before, but I wonder if the answer has changed now that you have been injured while under his care."

Will sighs and shuffles closer so that his face is resting against Hannibal's pectoral. Each time he breathes out, the warm air moves Hannibal's chest hair, shifting it so that it gently sways with Will's steady exhales. "I don't think so. Not after what happened with Tobias Budge. There will always be another killer, another wild chase that could end in my death. The darkness doesn't bother me, but the thought of not returning to you…"

Hannibal tightens his grip on Will. "It will not happen," he vows.

Not again.

"I'll tell Jack tomorrow," Will says, already half asleep. "I'm sure he won't take my answer without a fight."

"Then I shall be there to fight with you."

Tomorrow begins with the chime of a phone. Will mumbles something unintelligible, then blindly reaches for his cellphone on the nightstand. Hannibal watches this with an amused expression, having already been awake for the past several hours. Instead of rising to make breakfast or complete his typical routine, he had stayed in bed, arms pinned to his sides by Will's torso, happily listening to the sound of Will's steady breaths.

"Do you require assistance?" he asks when Will's wandering hand is no closer to securing his phone than before.

Will again says something undecipherable. Hannibal smiles down at his beloved boy and plucks the ringing phone from off of the table. He sees *Alana Bloom* flash across the screen. The smile slips from his lips as he hands Will the phone.

"Alana Bloom," Hannibal supplies when Will's bleary eyes slide across the bright letters without recognition.

"She needs to learn boundaries," Will grumbles. "It's way too early for a phone call.

"It is half past eight, darling," Hannibal says.

Will rolls his eyes, presses the green button to answer the call, then presses the phone against his ear. “Hello?”

Hannibal easily picks up the other side of the conversation. *“Will? Hey, it’s Alana. I’m so sorry to bother you while you are still recovering. How are your hands?”*

“Fine,” Will sighs, moving so that his head is propped on Hannibal’s shoulder. “Healing. Did you need something?”

Hannibal sighs at Will’s terse reply, in love with Will’s uncouth mouth—a very succulent mouth, one that fits so very well against his own, perhaps Hannibal should lean down and—

Will gives Hannibal a *look* and shifts so that Hannibal ends up kissing his shoulder rather than his mouth. “Alana?”

*“Yes, sorry. It’s Abigail Hobbs. I just received news that she will be discharged from the hospital in a week. I thought you might want to know.”*

“Does she have a place to go?”

“*Not at the moment. I’m thinking of offering her my guest room, but she and I don’t have the best relationship. I’m not sure that she would accept.*”

Will sighs and nods, though Alana cannot hear the motion through the phone. “Yeah, unfortunately I think you are right about that. Hannibal and I will visit her today and go through her options.”

“*Oh, the both of you*?” Alana’s voice is significantly cooler.

Will frowns into the receiver. “Yes, the both of us. We have both established a relationship with Abigail, and Hannibal is an excellent psychiatrist; he could help guide her decision if she is feeling lost.”

“*Very well. I’ll let the hospital know to expect the two of you sometime today*.”

“Goodbye, Alana.” Will hangs up his phone and tosses it onto the bed. It instantly slips beneath the comforter, lost to the depths of Hannibal’s silken sheets and their tangled limbs. “Sorry, I sort of volunteered your services without asking first.”

“What’s mine is yours, darling. I would love to join you on your visit to Abigail. The girl is, as you say, rather lost. I think we could both provide her with the stability she is seeking.”

“I hope so. I’m worried about her. Being a teenager is already difficult enough; trying to navigate that time without a parent is unthinkable.”

“Then we shall be her fathers,” Hannibal says. “It is our responsibility.”

Will lifts his head up from Hannibal’s shoulder and peers into his eyes. “Really? I didn’t imagine you as the paternal type.”

Hannibal sits up straighter in bed, unsure how much to reveal. Will, always so endlessly perceptive, immediately notices Hannibal's hesitation.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," Will says.

"You did not," Hannibal replies, honest. "I was simply remembering a memory long-since locked away." Hannibal rolls his shoulders, steels his spine as he makes another piece of himself vulnerable. "I had a sister, once. She died when we were children. I felt…paternal toward her. She was mine to protect, and I failed. I did not want to protect another since that loss. No one else has tugged that particular strand of emotion within me until Abigail Hobbs."

"I'm sorry," Will whispers. Hannibal can see his own pain echoed in Will's eyes, all of the hurt and trauma he has buried now thrust into the open and made anew due to Will's empathy. "You loved her so much."

"I did." Hannibal allows his shoulders to relax. "But now I find there is another who holds my heart."

Will's entire face softens. "You don't have to hide, you know. It's okay to hurt. It makes you human, not weak."

There's a lump in Hannibal's throat. He suddenly cannot swallow, can barely breathe. "I see."

Will kisses him, licks along the seam of his lips, then stands. "Come on. As much as I love the sight of your mussed hair and the scent of sex on your skin, I doubt that is going to endear you to Abigail Hobbs."

"Very well," Hannibal replies, accepting the change in subject for the reprieve it is. "Let us see what Miss Hobbs has in store for us."

# Chapter Ten

Abigail is waiting for them outside of the entrance of Port Haven when Hannibal and Will arrive.

She immediately stares at Will's neck.

Will—his darling, unpredictable boy—had decided to forgo any type of covering or concealment for the bite marks and bruises lining his throat. They are livid against his pale skin, each a vivid shade of red or purple. Hannibal's surprise when Will walked out of the door in such a state was nearly as potent as his arousal at the sight of Will so thoroughly marked.

"Shall we take another walk?" Hannibal suggests, drawing away Abigail's attention. The day is hot but not unbearable. The air smells of the salty tang of the sea and the fresh blooms of hyacinths and delphiniums. What Port Haven lacks in its security and staff it makes up for in its lush, verdant grounds. Hannibal gives the nearby garden an approving eye before looking back to Abigail.

"Sure," Abigail shrugs. There's a slight tremor in her voice. Hannibal glances at her clenched fists, the slope of her shoulders. Her dark hair hangs in front of her face and partially obscures her cheekbones and pale chin. It does not, however, cover the tight lines around her eyes.

Abigail is terrified.

And she is clearly trying to hide it.

Will leads them away from the hospital entrance and towards the gardens. A row of white trellises line up along the path, each covered in flowering clematis. Hannibal sniffs the crawling vines with appreciation as Will continues walking. The group of three reach the same oak tree they stopped at during their last visit, then stop.

"How is your therapy?" Will asks.

Abigail sighs and sits down on the trimmed green grass. "As good as it ever is." She picks at a few blades, fingertips trembling, then watches as the leaves float away on the breeze.

"Yeah, I'm not much for therapy myself," Will says. He plops down next to Abigail and looks up at the billowing leaves and shaking limbs above him. "It's hard when you know all the tricks."

"Do you?" Abigail asks, intrigued. "Know all the tricks, that is."

"Oh sure," Will grins. It's something warm and lopsided. Hannibal's heart stutters inside of his chest. "I learned them young. I think the first therapist that ever tried to pick my brain was the school counselor at Woolmarket Elementary School in Biloxi."

Hannibal adds this person to his *to-be-eaten* list. He is determined to track down each and every person that ever attempted to poke inside of Will's perfect mind and serve them back to Will on ceramic and glass, a feast for his senses when before the only thing these doltish swine had offered was annoyance and aggravation.

"Elementary school, huh? How'd they catch you?"

Will's smile slides, slips into something sad. "I told my teacher that she was always unhappy at work because seeing the young students in her class reminded her of the death of her child. I told her maybe if she left, she wouldn't be thinking of her stillborn anymore. She, uh, she didn't like that."

Hannibal can picture the scene so clearly, it's as if his mind has gotten hold of a brush and pen and painted the image into his retinas: Will, small and malnourished, eyes as wide and blue as the sea, verbalizing things he can see yet not understand. What six-year-old understands the trauma of a stillborn? The loss of a child? What first-grader should shoulder the burden of such things? What young boy should live with the pain and agony that comes with losing the fruit of one's womb and watching as they are buried under a mound of dirt and broken dreams? Will had. He had, and with no choice in the matter; his empathy took his childhood and consumed it, a flame that licked along his mind until only the ashes, the aftertaste of other's emotions and feelings, remained.

"Damn," Abigail says after a moment.

"Language," Hannibal chides the girl, though his eyes never stray from Will. Hannibal leans down and sits next to him on the grass, ignoring the mud and twigs pressing into his trousers. Will looks up at Hannibal, and it's as though he is still that child in Biloxi, face unlined, the sea-blue of his gaze all-consuming as it catches Hannibal and entraps him.

"Are you with me, darling?" Hannibal whispers.

Will nods. He takes a deep breath, then turns so that he is facing Abigail once more. "Sorry," he tells her.

"Don't be," she immediately replies. She places her hand on top of Will's and lightly squeezes. The movement is manipulative, done to garner sympathy and affection. She is purposely endearing herself to Will in an attempt to have another ally on her side.

Hannibal is proud of the girl.

Perhaps they have more in common than he previously thought.

"Surely not all psychiatrists are bad," Hannibal says, hoping to lighten the mood.

Abigail huffs and releases Will's hand, tangling her fingertips into the ends of her hair to play with the strands. "Maybe. Maybe not."

Will grins and nudges Hannibal in the shoulder. "Not all," he agrees. "But only if they can cook for you. And buy you ridiculously expensive scotch."

Abigail quirks an eyebrow and stares at Hannibal. “I’ve heard about your dinner parties. Dr. Bloom says they are the best she’s ever attended.”

Hannibal ducks his head in false modesty. “Alana is generous with her praise.” A pause, then, “Would you like to try one of my meals for yourself? I would love to have you as a guest at my table.”

Abigail visibly perks up at the offer, though there is still a tense set in her spine. She stands up from the ground and leans back against the rough bark of the tree, arms crossed tightly over her chest. “I’d…like that. I guess Dr. Bloom told you that I’m leaving next week.”

“She did,” Will says. “She also mentioned that she offered you her guest room.”

Abigail’s nose scrunches up in distaste. “I don’t think that’s going to happen. I get enough psychoanalyzing here; I think living in the same apartment as a psychiatrist might just tip me over the edge.”

Will stands as well, shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans and stares off into the distance. Hannibal follows suit; there is no need to further desecrate his trousers if Will is standing (and truly, Hannibal will follow Will wherever he goes, even if it is sitting atop damp grass or leaning against the rough bark of a tree while wearing a bespoke suit, and if that is not love then Hannibal does not know what is).

“I heard from Jack that your parent’s house back in Minnesota was sold,” Will says. “Could you use the proceeds from the sale to rent out your own place?”

Abigail’s expression sours. “No. The families of my dad’s…victims are all suing for wrongful death. I won’t see a penny of the sale, or of my parent’s life insurance. I guess murder wasn’t covered under their policy.”

“You were a victim of your father too, Abigail,” Will says, voice feather-soft.

“Yeah, well, I’m not adding my name to the lawsuit.”

They all stand in silence for a moment. Hannibal can see the wheels in Will’s precious mind turning, and Hannibal decides to wait and see how Will wishes to proceed before offering Abigail a place at his home.

Hannibal is surprised how often he has done that these past few months: waited and allowed Will to make the final decision. Hannibal is usually the dominant force in a situation—even if there are other, louder voices, Hannibal’s subtle influence and manipulations can steer any conversation or situation in the direction he wishes it to go. He does not need to be loud when he can simply be smart. Will, however…Will is a force to be reckoned with. A god amongst swine. Will is unpredictable. Smart. Passionate. He is everything that Hannibal could ever ask for in a partner. And he is the only person that Hannibal will willingly relinquish control to. Hannibal wonders if Will is aware of the enormity of the gift he has been given.

Somehow, Hannibal knows Will is aware (knows he is the only one who could possibly understand).

“Abigail, why don’t you come back with us for lunch,” Will finally says. “I always think better with a full stomach.” Will turns and looks at Hannibal, asks him for permission without uttering a single word.

Hannibal melts. “A wonderful idea, Mylimasis. I have some pork loin that would suit perfectly for the occasion.”

Will smiles, and Hannibal clears his throat to stop a pitiful whine from escaping. “Great,” Will says. “I’ll text Alana to let her know Abigail is coming back with us for the afternoon.”

Abigail nods, and the three of them make their way back to the parking lot. Just like at the BSHCI, Hannibal swears he can see a flash of crimson from the corner of his eye. When he turns to track the movement, his nose picks up the scent of fresh sweat, fake leather, and floral perfume.

Freddie Lounds.

“I believe we have a follower,” Hannibal murmurs into Will’s ear as they slide into the Bentley. “What are your feelings on TattleCrime?”

Will sneers, and the entire ride back to Baltimore is spent with him and Abigail disparaging Freddie Lounds in more and more creative language.

“She tried to talk to me,” Abigail recalls. “The day I was brought to Port Haven. I think she wanted to interview me or something. But the staff wouldn’t let her into the building; she skulked around the outside of the entrance for over an hour before finally leaving.”

Hannibal thinks, with some satisfaction, to the photos of Miss Lounds that he had printed and distributed to the Port Haven staff once he knew Abigail would be returning to the hospital. Though Miss Lounds has her purposes, the book she tried to write with Abigail last time caused a friction between Abigail and Will that Hannibal did not want occurring this iteration. Hannibal is glad his plan to keep Abigail and Freddie separated has been successful (as most of his plans are, of course).

As soon as they are parked, Hannibal leaves Abigail and Will in the study—giving them privacy to talk, to bond—and goes into the kitchen to prepare lunch. By the time the meal is finished over an hour later, Abigail has finally relaxed, and Will’s scent is honey-sweet as he sits at the kitchen table.

Hannibal plates their food with his typical flourish. “Pork tenderloin *au poivre*,” he announces, “with a red wine reduction and *shallot confit*.”

Will’s smile is bemused, indulgent as he waits for Hannibal to finish talking. He is the first to stab into the tenderloin, a soft moan leaving his mouth as his teeth dig into the tender flesh.

Hannibal watches with heavy-lidded eyes before turning to stare at Abigail as she takes her first bite.

She spears a piece of the tenderloin and brings it to her mouth. As soon as the meat touches her tongue, she pauses, fork still perched between her lips, and darts a glance over to where Hannibal is sitting at the head of the table. Not a single sound passes from her mouth, but her eyes say what her lips cannot. They widen an imperceptible amount, pupils dilating. The blue of her irises warms from glacial ice to a gentle ocean tide.

Eventually, Abigail pulls the fork from her mouth and sets it back down onto her plate. She chews. She swallows.

She licks her lips.

"It's good," she says.

Hannibal beams. "I am so glad you enjoy it. There is something innate in humanity which begs us to share our meals, is there not? Humanity began hunting over a million years ago. It is what elevated us from animal to man. Hunting predated culture, language, music. It is embedded into our very bones to share our bounty with those we care about."

Will huffs next to him and rolls his eyes. "She gave you a compliment, Hannibal. She didn't ask for a history lesson."

Hannibal smirks and dabs at the corners of his mouth with a napkin. "Forgive me, darling. It is a habit of mine to share."

"It's fine," Abigail quickly says. She takes another bite, this one nearly obscenely large. She chews for a moment before saying, "I, uh, like to learn new things." She peers up at Hannibal beneath thick lashes. "I think there's a lot you could teach me."

Hannibal beams.

A most successful lunch.

After they eat, Hannibal leads them to his study for a glass of freshly-squeezed lemonade. Will sits beside Hannibal on the couch, their knees touching. Abigail stands by the empty fireplace with her glass, eyes distant as she looks into the hearth.

"I have a proposition for you," Hannibal begins. "My house is equipped with multiple guest rooms. If you are amenable to the idea, I would like to offer you a place to stay, at least until you have saved enough funds to move out on your own."

Abigail turns and stares at Hannibal. She moves her gaze to Will, eyes piercing as she takes in the distance between their bodies—or the lack thereof.

She nods. "Yeah, I would like that. Thank you."

"The pleasure is mine," Hannibal demurs.

Will and Hannibal drive Abigail back to Port Haven not long after. Will goes home to tend to his pack. Hannibal does an inventory of his freezer, plucking a few names from his Rolodex

to supplement his dwindling stock. Soon, he will have another mouth to feed. He plans on keeping his freezer well-supplied during Abigail's stay.

Hannibal imagines, for a moment, what it would be like for Abigail to join him on one of his hunts. He pictures teaching her how to stalk a victim, how to hook them up and drain them of blood, how to make the proper cuts, how to know which organs to keep and which organs to leave. Something stirs in Hannibal's stomach, something…foreign.

It's longing.

Hannibal longs for the image his mind has conjured up to be brought to life.

How strange. Hannibal did not indulge in such imaginings last time around. Abigail was merely a pawn, a way to keep Will close and then destroy him.

This time, however, Hannibal sees Abigail for what she truly is: potential.

The potential for family.

Hannibal shudders at the word and finishes washing the used dishes for lunch, content to place the image of Abigail—hands drenched in blood, a wide smile on her face—behind one of the locked doors of his Mind Palace.

The next day, Hannibal receives a notification on his tablet that Freddie Lounds has posted a new article on TattleCrime.

*THE NEW MURDER FAMILY?* The headline reads in a rather garish font. Hannibal sighs and scrolls down to see photos of himself at the BSHCI, photos of Will at various crime scenes from the past two months, and finally a photo of him, Will, and Abigail talking yesterday at Port Haven. The bite marks on Will's neck have been enhanced, the color lurid and bright against the pixels of the screen.

Beneath the photos is the article.

*Has Abigail Hobbs, daughter of the Minnesota Shrike, found herself a new murder nest to call home? Recently, Abigail has been seen cavorting with the FBI's criminal profiler—and criminally insane—Will Graham. It takes one to know one, dear readers. Perhaps that is why Abigail Hobbs, who is suspected of helping her father kill over eight victims that looked identical to her, has decided to mix company with the unstable man.*

The article goes on to describe Will's instability as well as his presence during Franklyn's death. Hannibal is mentioned as an afterthought; it seems as though even Freddie Lounds's rigorous digging was not enough to uncover anything nefarious about Hannibal. Freddie merely casts Hannibal as the 'unwitting alibi' for Abigail and Will's murderous habits.

Oh, if only.

Hannibal turns off his tablet and grabs the duffel bag containing his swimwear and towel. It is only six in the morning. As Sundays are always rather busy at the aquatic center, Hannibal prefers to visit as early as possible. Hannibal takes his time completing his laps, enjoying the

feel of cool water caressing his body and the burst of heat that flicker into his lungs whenever he does not draw enough air.

When Hannibal emerges, he showers, dries off, then changes back into his regular clothing—a pair of linen trousers and a lightweight button-up that clings nicely to his biceps and deltoids. As Hannibal pulls out his phone, he notices a missed call from an unknown number, one with a local area code. He clicks the number and presses the button to call back, bringing his phone to his ear. He walks to his car as he listens to the ringing on the other end. Hannibal is positive he knows who will be waiting for him on the line, but until that person answers—

"Hello?"

Hannibal smiles into his phone. "Matthew. So good to hear from you. I assume the reason you are calling is that everything has been taken care of?"

"Oh sure, Dr. Lecter." Matthew's fake lisp grows more pronounced with each word. "Just like I promised."

"I am impressed with your dedication," Hannibal says. He knows Matthew's weakness—his desperate need for admiration and validation—and uses that to his full advantage. "Just as the Ripper will be."

"What now?" Matthew asks. "You mentioned dinner."

"Indeed," Hannibal agrees amiably. "I did. Would you like to come over this evening? Assuming your schedule allows for it, of course."

Hannibal is content to let Matthew believe that he is in control of the timing of their meal. The illusion of control will lower his defenses. Not that Hannibal needs the advantage; Matthew is a fledgling, a hunter just beginning to make its mark. Hannibal is the ancient shadow that slithers out from under the bed, hungry and ready to devour.

"Tonight works," Matthew agrees. "I am off of my shift now. Just gotta get rid of this uniform and shower. Can I come over at six?"

"Six is fine," Hannibal says.

"And the Ripper will be there? Will, I mean."

"Yes. Will and I will both be present."

Matthew lets out a short, sharp whistle. It grates on Hannibal's ear, and he pulls the phone away with a frown. "God damn, this is actually happening. Okay, Dr. Lecter. Six o'clock."

"Until then," Hannibal says. He hangs up, starts his car, then drives home. There is much to prepare before tonight, after all.

First is to decide on the dinner menu. Though Matthew will not, in fact, be dining at Hannibal's table—Hannibal plans on drugging the boy and securing him in the basement

until Hannibal is finished eating—he still ruminates over tonight's menu with care. Meals are not to be squandered. Murder can wait; dinner cannot.

Next is to decide what pieces he is going to take from Matthew's body. The boy is trim. Lean. Mostly muscle with little-to-no fat. That changes what cuts Hannibal will keep, what organs to preserve and which to dispose of.

Lastly, Hannibal must ensure that Will is thoroughly occupied for the evening. He calls Will, unsurprised when it goes to voicemail as it is still before nine in the morning.

"Darling," Hannibal says, "I would love to hear from you when you have woken. Call me when you have a moment."

Hannibal hangs up and begins preparing dinner. He gets a message from Jack Crawford less than an hour later confirming that Tobias Budge is, indeed, dead. Jack's text is curse-laden, using several…*unique* expletives to describe Chilton's hospital and the staff he employs. Jack finishes his message by apologizing for Freddie Lounds's article about Hannibal and Will and offering to file a restraining order against her on their behalf.

At one o'clock, Hannibal finally gets a call from Will.

"Hello," Hannibal answers, wiping his hands on the dish towel slung over his shoulder. "How is your day, beloved?"

Will laughs into the phone. The laughter is warm. Radiant. Hannibal leans into the phone as if he can soak up the sound of it through the receiver and fill his endlessly empty stomach. "It started with a splash, actually. Harley thought it would be fun to drag me into the stream with him while I was out fishing with the dogs. Nearly lost my phone." A sigh. "How are you?"

"Better now," Hannibal admits. "Do you have plans for this evening?"

"No," Will says. His voice changes, curls into something seductive. "Should I?"

Hannibal wishes, suddenly, that Matthew could have waited to dispatch Tobias. Preferably on a night when Will was busy and not offering himself up like a sweet morsel ready to be devoured by Hannibal's aching teeth.

"Unfortunately, I am having an acquaintance over for dinner. Perhaps you could join me afterward? My acquaintance should be gone by eight."

"Sure," Will readily agrees. "Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself, darling."

"And my copious amounts of dog hair."

"I would expect nothing less." Hannibal smiles into the receiver, then wonders when his voice had become so…warm. Besotted. Surely he does not always sound so smitten when speaking with Will? He imagines his past self, imagines what that past self would say, if they would repulsed by the happiness in his tone or merely surprised.

He imagines Mischa, gap-toothed and beaming, finally resting in peace knowing that her brother has found his other half.

“See you tonight,” Will says.

Hannibal brushes away the tears that have formed in the corners of his eyes. “Tonight, darling.”

*I love you*.

The phrase goes unspoken, but there is a pause, a breath, a space where the three words slot perfectly into the silence. Hannibal thinks Will hears them anyway, the shadow of a bright light passing between them.

Hannibal hangs up, stares at the black phone of his screen with far too much wistfulness, and finishes preparing for tonight. At 5:30, he is dressed, dinner is simmering on the stove, and a syringe filled with Temazepam is resting snugly in his suit pocket. Hannibal finds he is more excited by the thought of Will visiting him tonight than he is at ending Matthew Brown’s life. A strange thing. He feels hollowed out, cored, the center of him removed and filled with something…other. Something that smells of glacial water and sun-kissed skin.

Hannibal cannot say he minds the change.

Matthew Brown is many things, but punctual is not one of them. Nearly an hour past their designated meeting time, Hannibal’s front doorbell rings once, twice. The sound of it echoes in the empty halls of his house. Hannibal frowns, adjusts the lapels of his suit jacket, and walks to the foyer with sure, confident steps.

“Hello,” Hannibal greets as soon as the door is open. “You’re late.”

Matthew is dressed as if he were attending a date. His brown hair is gelled and combed to the side. His skin reeks of aftershave, something atrocious (far more atrocious than even Will’s infamous scent) and cheap. He’s wearing an ill-fitting suit, though Hannibal must give the boy credit for at least polishing his worn leather shoes.

“Come inside,” Hannibal says.

Matthew hesitates for the briefest moment before stepping into the foyer. He keeps his front facing Hannibal at all times, eyes never leaving the older man. There is no trust between them, clearly. “Thanks again for the invite, Dr. Lecter.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says, tilting his head. “However, I believe I told you during our last meeting that the Ripper does not tolerate rudeness.”

“You did,” Matthew admits. He rolls his neck and glares at Hannibal’s chin.

“I believe showing up nearly an hour late would fall into such a category,” Hannibal says. He should be soothing the boy, leading him toward the dinner table like a lamb to slaughter, but Hannibal’s ingrained abhorance of all things rude refuses to let this gaffe rest. Matthew must

know why he is being punished later, when his body is strung up and Hannibal is taking him apart piece by piece.

“So would lying,” Matthew drawls. He stands up straighter. The extra two inches this adds to his height puts him level with Hannibal. “And you have been lying to me, Dr. Lecter. I don’t appreciate that.”

Hannibal slips his hand into his pocket, but before he can draw out the needle, Matthew pounces. He knocks both of them down to the floor. One of his knees goes deep into Hannibal’s groin, the other sliding across his torso to keep him pinned. Hannibal’s head nearly slams against the hardwood floor, but he manages to shift his neck to stave off the worst of the impact. His grip on the syringe is not so lucky; the back of his hand slaps harshly against the ground, and the small glass container goes skidding across the floor and rolls beneath one of the armchairs.

Hannibal grunts, attempts to twist so that he is the one on top, but Matthew’s hold on him is firm and unyielding. Matthew keeps both of Hannibal’s wrists pinned above his head. The boy’s brown eyes flash, and a feral grin breaks out over his face.

“Surprised?” he grunts out, hands digging into the flesh of Hannibal’s wrists as he tightens his grip. Hannibal flexes his forearms, but Matthew is strong—stronger than Hannibal expected. He curses his own prideful folly and waits for the right opportunity to strike. Matthew may be strong, but he is young and inexperienced; Hannibal simply has to watch and wait, a snake coiled tightly in the grass. “Like I said,” Matthew continues, “people don’t suspect you when you look like me. It’s usually their last mistake.”

Matthew keeps one of his hands wrapped around Hannibal’s wrists. The other he moves to squeeze Hannibal’s throat. As soon as Matthew lets go with one of his hands, Hannibal strikes. He is quick, far quicker than the boy is expecting. One moment Matthew is straddling Hannibal, the next Matthew is being shoved, face-first, into the floor.

Hannibal grips Matthew’s hair between his fingertips and yanks the boy’s head back before slamming it to the ground with a sickening *crunch*. Blood gushes from Matthew’s broken nose, painting the dark wood the color of crimson. Hannibal grins, something wild and monstrous, and bashes Matthew’s head into the floor again and again until his body is limp and pliant beneath Hannibal’s own.

Hannibal stands, dusts off the knees of his trousers, and retrieves the syringe. He sticks the needle into Matthew’s blood-splattered neck and watches with satisfaction as the black plunger reaches the end of the glass barrel.

Hannibal peers down at Matthew’s splayed body. His cheap suit has torn at the seams, one of the elbows completely ripped away and hanging to the jacket by a single thread. The smell of copper, warm and salt-laced, covers the smell of Matthew’s cheap cologne. Hannibal breathes deeply, savors the scent.

Sighing, Hannibal leans down and wraps his arms around Matthew’s torso. He clasps his hands across Matthew’s stomach and uses the strength in his thighs and calves to lift up the body and sling it over his right shoulder.

Just as Hannibal is turning to lead Matthew to the basement, there's a muffled noise from behind him, then the distinct sound of a doorknob being turned. Hannibal can only tilt his head back and watch with abject horror as Will—his Will, the one he can never predict, the one he loves more than he ever thought he could love another, the one who is an hour early *and should not be here*—steps through the front door.

For a moment, there's only silence.

Hannibal adjusts his grip on Matthew's limp body, eyeing the blood stain on the floor, the lingering scent of sour fear in the air, the bruises lining his own wrists and the disarray of his hair and clothing. Hannibal stares at Will, at his unfathomable blue eyes, and opens his mouth to say the only thing he can think of in the moment.

"I can explain."

# Chapter Eleven - Will's Interlude

When Will had pulled the trigger, he did not expect to wake up.

He expected a bright light, perhaps. A stairway ascending into clouds or a devastating fall and then the harsh scent of sulfur. If he had truly murdered Abigail and swallowed her ear, he deserved nothing less than endless flames that would lick his body and consume him just as thoroughly as Hannibal's influence. If he were lucky, there would be nothing at all. Just complete and utter oblivion.

Will was never lucky.

Instead, Will had woken up to the day he'd met the devil incarnate. The day he'd met the man who had let his brain boil inside of itself, who had framed him for murder, who had watched his life fall apart with an apathetic expression and piercing maroon eyes.

Will had contemplated finding another gun and pulling the trigger right then and there. Perhaps the second time would do the trick.

But Will was not—had never been—one to give up so easily. So he forced himself to dress in the same outfit, put on the same atrocious aftershave from the bottle with a ship on the label, and drive the same familiar route to Quantico. Just to see what would happen, he told himself. Just to see if this really was the same day with the same man.

It was the same day.

But Hannibal was not the same man.

This Hannibal was…obsessed with Will. In love with him. As soon as they made eye contact for the first time in Jack's office, Will's empathy was overwhelmed with the sheer *potency* of Hannibal's desire. The depth of his affection. The total and complete vehemence of his love.

Will was so mad he thought he might spontaneously combust.

How dare he.

How *dare* he.

The man who had ruined his life, who had killed their daughter, who had driven Will past the point of no return so that the only recourse Will felt he had was to send a fucking *bullet through his brain*, that same man was now going to act as if he cared? As if he…loved Will?

Will stormed from Jack's office and plotted a hundred ways he could turn Hannibal into a cold, unfeeling corpse by morning.

Will went home that evening to his pack and immediately felt guilty for leaving them behind last time. Sure, he had not been the best caretaker at the end. His inflamed mind had driven

out all sense of time or responsibility. The dogs had followed him into the night while he'd chased his endless hallucinations. They had gone hours, sometimes days, without fresh food or water as Will had melted beneath the weight of his insanity. Will could not forgive—nor forget—how he had treated his pack in the past. Will vowed that, now that he was at the beginning of the end of his story, he would do everything in his power to keep them safe this time around.

After giving each and every dog ample affection, Will laid out the profile of the Ripper—as he had so many times before—and verified that Hannibal was indeed the monster he had envisioned the last time around (after all, so much of Will's memories were frazzled and disjointed, perhaps his revelation of Hannibal as the Ripper was false, too).

But of course, Will was again not lucky. Hannibal was indeed the Ripper. And as Will puzzled over the Ripper's crime scenes, he had an epiphany.

The Ripper wasn't taking surgical trophies.

He was eating them.

Will had promptly run to the restroom and lost the contents of his gas-station dinner. He had lain against the cool porcelain and wondered, not for the first time, if instead of waking up to relive his life he had instead woken up in some strange version of hell.

It was fine. Will was fine. Everything was fine.

Will knew what was going to happen; that gave him an advantage. Hannibal would not frame Will for his murders, not this time. Will would protect himself and his small family as best he could. Hannibal would not ruin him. Hannibal would end up behind bars, not Will, and everyone would finally see the monster beneath the mask.

Then Hannibal had to go and change the script.

Will had assumed that, after he put a bullet inside of his skull, the world had reoriented itself to that he alone had woken up in the past. But this Hannibal, the one in Will's strange new reality, was not the Hannibal that he'd left behind. This Hannibal visited Will in his office with that same besotted expression he'd worn while supposedly meeting Will for the first time. Did that mean Hannibal had also died in their previous life? Or was this some sort of alternate reality with a different Hannibal altogether? Will wasn't sure, but he was going to figure it out, one way or another.

Will was nervous to allow Hannibal into his office. Without a script to follow, Will worried that Hannibal would again find the upper hand in the back-and-forth of their fluid relationship. It seemed strange Hannibal would visit him at his office at the FBI Academy at all, the man completely out of place in the shabby room with his waistcoat and cuff links and perfectly gelled hair.

Will had played along, taking his cues from Hannibal, asking about the Hobbs' case when he really wanted to ask *what the fuck are you planning now, Hannibal?* And Hannibal, endlessly perceptive though he may be, did not answer the unasked question.

The true test of Will's resolve came with Hannibal's proffered protein scramble.

Will knew what Hannibal was feeding him. Knew what the sausage contained. Knew where the Ripper was getting his meat.

And yet, all Will smelled was…perfectly cooked food. His stomach rumbled, his hands shook, his mouth watered.

And really, if Will was already in hell, he might as well enjoy his stay.

And by god, did he enjoy Hannibal's cooking.

Hannibal had watched him eat with his usual steely gaze. Will had understood, then, just why Hannibal took such pleasure in feeding other people. It did nothing to dissuade Will from enjoying each and every bite he took. He ignored Hannibal and focused on the taste of fluffy eggs and spiced sausage and sweet bell peppers. He drank his coffee, feeling more whole than he had since waking up for the second time.

Then Hannibal had, apropos of nothing, told Will he was sick with encephalitis and Hannibal had already taken the liberty of ordering him a brain scan.

What. The. Fuck.

Will had spent days, weeks, *months* during his previous life begging and praying that the insanity he was experiencing stemmed from something physical rather than psychological. Hannibal had been the one to convince him otherwise. The one to warn Will that his illness was stemmed from something completely mental, something wrong with the way Will's mind worked rather than his mind itself.

Hannibal had also been the one to murder Doctor Sutcliffe, so really Will shouldn't have trusted the man's opinions on his mental health to begin with.

Will had been helpless but to send Hannibal packing after that particular revelation. He did not know if Hannibal was even telling the truth (though Will's empathy could pick up no deceit in Hannibal's words. Then again, Will had not caught any of Hannibal's other lies, so his empathy was perhaps moot when it came to the man in general). After all, Will's brain had been scanned before. The MRI had come back normal—as normal as Will's brain could be, what with the excess mirror neurons and Asperger's. Now, Hannibal was claiming Will was sick (had been the entire time), and he could smell it on him. Was Will supposed to… believe Hannibal? Thank him for the impromptu diagnosis and then be on his merry way to the hospital?

No.

Just…no.

Will could not handle it. He had been shaking as he left his office. He canceled classes for the rest of the day and went on a long, aimless drive. Will had ended up parked at a service station near the highway exit that headed west, toward Minnesota. He pictured Abigail,

pictured her throat cut open and bleeding onto the floor, pictured her ear sitting in a puddle of bile at the bottom of his kitchen sink.

Had that been real? Or just another manipulation by the devil himself, the man capable of pulling strings through literal time and bringing Will back to life to be played with once more.

It made Will sick to think about.

This entire situation—from pulling the trigger to meeting Hannibal for the second time—had made Will feel unbalanced. Unmoored. As much as he was ever unmoored the last time around, perhaps even more. At least last time he thought he had a friend in Hannibal, someone he could confide in, someone he could trust. Now, there was no one that Will could trust aside from himself. It was a nauseating feeling, a boat spinning in a churning current with no paddle.

Hannibal was supposed to be his paddle last time.

Instead, the man had framed him for murder, killed their adoptive daughter, then drove Will to commit suicide.

Will had forced himself to pull it together—as much as he was able to—and focus on something else. Something positive. Perhaps this second chance would not all be bad; perhaps Will could prevent Hannibal from not only hurting Will, but others. Abigail. Georgia. It sparked enough hope in Will that he was able to get out his car without immediately collapsing to the ground from his trembling legs. He took that hope and clung tight, walking into the service station with a firm spine and a clearer head. He grabbed a cheap cup of coffee —his pallet spoiled from Hannibal's espresso machine that looked like some sort of sci-fi contraption—before driving back home to his dogs. Though much was chaos right now, at least *they* were some source of stability.

Will attributed it to their lack of speaking ability and non-opposable thumbs.

When Will saw Hannibal next, it was at the door of his motel room in Minnesota. The day Abigail Hobbs almost died. The day Hannibal called the Hobbs' residence, simply because the Chesapeake Ripper was bored and wanted to see what would happen.

Will wasn't going to allow that to happen again. True, Abigail had not died last time. But that did not mean that Hannibal's interference this time around would end the same way. Abigail's life was too precious to risk. Hannibal's manipulations would have to be stopped, and Will was the only one capable of stopping them (the only one cognizant that they existed at all).

Will realized, then, that he had another advantage besides simply remembering the past and what would (probably) occur in the future. In this timeline, Hannibal clearly did not think Will remembered any of their life together, otherwise he would not be treating Will this way (like a friend, like an equal, like someone who mattered rather than a plaything). Will could use that knowledge against the man, could twist it and turn it into something sharp and pointed.

Will tried to send Hannibal away from the motel room, but the heartbreak on Hannibal's face, the sheer destruction the older man felt when Will denied him entrance, was enough to have Will changing his mind and inviting Hannibal inside instead.

"I'm sorry," Will had murmured in explanation for his social awkwardness. But was he sorry? Or was Will simply biding his time, waiting for Hannibal to slip up so that Will could expose him as the monster he was? Even Will didn't know what his long-term plan was—if he had one at all.

Luckily, Will did have a plan for how to save Abigail. It was simple enough to 'slip' at the construction site and distract Hannibal from making the phone call. Hannibal's worry over Will's injury was not faked. His concern was not put-upon, was not a mask he wore to endear Will to him in order to manipulate Will further.

The man honestly thought himself to be in love with Will.

Will…wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Despite Hannibal not warning Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Abigail was still taken to the hospital, though this time for shock rather than a gash across her carotid arteries. Will wondered if Abigail would be different without her wound, without her father's knife against her throat the last memory she had of him before Will emptied a clip of bullets into his chest. If she would still try to sell her soul to Freddie Lounds to profit from her story, despite a clear marker of her father's shame splashed across her skin. Will planned to keep Abigail as far away from Freddie Lounds (and Hannibal) as possible. Abigail would never need to kill Nicholas Boyle, not if Will had anything to say about it. He would protect Abigail from Hannibal—with his own life, if he had to. He had given up his life once before. He would do it again if it meant keeping Abigail from experiencing the same fate she had last time.

When Will returned to Baltimore, he decided to go to the hospital and see if Hannibal was telling the truth about the encephalitis. When the brain scan returned, Will eyed the swollen half of his mind with a perfectly neutral expression, thanking the nurse for her care and accepting the IV that slipped beneath the skin in his forearm with a small sting, then nothing.

That had been a turning point for Will.

Maybe last time, Hannibal had lied. Maybe last time, Hannibal had played with the fire in Will's brain, and they had both ended up burned. Clearly, Hannibal did want to make the same mistake this time around. If the man wanted to apologize and keep Will safe and healthy, who was Will to deny him?

Yet despite accepting this change in Hannibal, Will did not expect to see any change within himself.

Will never planned to fall in love.

It happened slowly. So slowly that Will did not recognize the gentle, steady creep of affection for what it was. It was little things at first. A skip in his heart each time Hannibal revealed his crooked bottom teeth. The way Will breathed deeper whenever Hannibal was close in order

to catch even a hint of his clean, musk-filled scent. The smile Will found on his face with each and every text he received from the older man.

The fact that Will could overlook literal cannibalism in their relationship if that is what it took to stay together.

Will began to realize the depths of his feelings for Hannibal when the endlessly organized and meticulous man canceled his appointments and boarded a plane to literally fly across the country just to ensure that Will was well, looked after. Hannibal was so patient at the crime scene in North Carolina. He brought Will down from his panic attack with soothing words and an intimate tone, one Will ached to hear every day for the rest of his life.

Afterward, Hannibal had again invited Will to a dinner party. Will wavered on whether or not to go. There were so many complicating factors, so many things to consider, so many hurts and past wrongs. In the end, though, Will said *fuck it*.

He deserved to be happy.

And if Hannibal was what made Will happy, then so be it.

Will planted the seed in Hannibal's mind that darkness did not scare him. He needed Hannibal pliant and open for when the reveal came—the revelation that Will knew what was on his plate when Hannibal fed him meat, that Will knew what Hannibal did late at night when the rest of Baltimore was asleep, that Will knew each and every sin that Hannibal had committed last time around and Will was *still* choosing him, over and over again.

Of course, that was when Alana tried to ruin everything.

"You've changed, Will," she had said late one night. Her floral perfume had been thick, cloying. She had been wearing a tight-fitted dress and had curled her long black hair, had put on a fresh coat of shiny lip gloss, had painted her eyelids a soft blue to bring out the shade of her eyes. "I've never seen you like this before. You practically glow."

She'd leaned in then, uninvited, and pressed her lips to his. Her lips were far too soft, and they left a smear of sticky gloss on his mouth that Will immediately went to wipe off.

"Alana…" Will had begun. God, what could he even say? That if she were truly his friend, she wouldn't have let his brain fry inside of his head the last time around? That if she truly cared about him, she would have believed him when he said he wasn't crazy? That if she were truly a good person, she wouldn't cling to Will now that he was stable and happy instead of trying to help him before?

Will couldn't say any of those things. All that had come out was an abrupt, "You should leave." Then Will was driving into the night, just like last time, desperate to see Hannibal—desperate to make this right.

And by god, Hannibal knew how to make things right.

Will wondered what his past self would say, seeing Will lose his virginity to the Chesapeake Ripper. The way Will writhed beneath the monster, ecstasy like he has never felt before racing up his spine as he carved a space for himself inside of the man who had ruined his life, then brought it back together again.

Will decided to call it character growth and move on.

Franklyn was the next hurdle in Will's and Hannibal's relationship.

As Will was pretending to ponder over the human harp at the Hippodrome Theater in Baltimore, he had noticed a familiar face from the corner of his eye. He'd turned, then spotted Tobias Budge in the most ridiculous disguise, the kind criminals wear in low-budget children's films. Really, a peacoat in the middle of summer? Will had rolled his eyes at the man's outfit (seriously, how do these serial killers keep getting away with their murders when they are *so obvious*), then followed him out of the theater and into his car.

Will couldn't let Tobias get to Hannibal. Not when the fight had only barely ended in Hannibal's favor last time. Who knew which way the altercation would go if Tobias managed to catch Hannibal unsuspecting this time around?

So Will had trailed behind Tobias and followed him into his pretentious string shop. Franklyn, Tobias's patient (who Will had met only after he was dead on the floor of Hannibal's office in both of their previous lives), arrived at the same time as he and Tobias did. The blubbering man had followed them into the shop, then down the stairs into the basement where the smell of lye was so strong it made Will's eyes water and his nostrils flare.

Clearly, the man did not possess a single ounce of self-preservation.

"Don't do this!" Franklyn had begged, sobbing. "We can fix this, Tobias. Together."

"Fix what?" Tobias had hissed, dragging his eyes away from where Will waited in the shadows and over to Franklyn, who had pulled a used tissue from the pocket of his tweed suit and was proceeding to blow his nose loudly and without any regard for the rising tension in the room. "You brought the FBI right to my doorstep. You had one job, one *single*, facile task, and even that you could not complete."

"And what task was that?" Will had asked. He'd slowly reached down to the gun clipped to his belt, hoping the darkness of Tobias's basement would shroud the movement.

Tobias glared at Will and reached into his own pocket. "Why, bring me the Chesapeake Ripper, of course."

Damn it, Tobias still thought Hannibal was the Ripper (Will had hoped, naively perhaps, that because Hannibal knew what transpired last time around that he would be more careful in concealing his illicit outings. Obviously, that was not the case if Tobias still believed Hannibal to be the Ripper). Tobias's belief—while correct—meant that Hannibal was in danger, and Will needed to do something to protect him, otherwise this entire situation was about to get very messy, very fast.

Will did the only thing he could think of, then.

He made Tobias think he was the Ripper instead.

“Franklyn completed your task, then,” Will said with more confidence than he was feeling. “The Ripper is here. A pity you cannot see him.” To solidify his claim, Will had reached up and carefully, expertly snapped Franklyn’s neck. A quick twist to the side to sever the spinal cord.

Franklyn had dropped to the basement floor in an untidy heap, his brown eyes open wide with shock, not even a hint of fear in their depths. He had never seen it coming.

Tobias hadn’t, either. He had stared at Will with something akin to wonder, then pulled the garotte from the pocket of his coat with a feral grin.

“The Ripper has come out to play,” he had purred. “How did you like my serenade?”

“I prefer jazz,” Will replied.

Tobias did not seem to appreciate that answer.

Will had sighed, grabbed the gun from its harness, and shot Tobias in the shoulder, after which Tobias attempted to sever Will’s head from his neck with the wire garotte. Will had never been more glad to see Jack Crawford than in that moment, blood pouring from the deep gashes in his palms, ears ringing from the gunshot.

Will didn’t expect Hannibal to be right behind Jack.

The emotions of the day—the excitement of waking up in Hannibal’s bed, the surprise at finding Tobias at the crime scene, the fear that Tobias might find Hannibal and hurt him, the adrenaline from taking a life—all of it had crashed into Will’s psyche like a torrential rainfall, a steady wave that threatened to pull him under until he drowned.

Kissing Hannibal was not a clutch for balance, but it sure as hell felt nice.

Franklyn’s dead body staring at them the entire time they kissed was not as nice.

Hannibal was so patient with Will, after. He walked the dogs and fed them their various medicines and pills. He made Will dinner (human-free, unless Hannibal had managed to turn a human liver into shrimp), then fed Will each bite by hand. Hannibal’s entire face had lit up during dinner, as if feeding Will was the penultimate moment in his life, the one he memory would think back on and ponder as he lay on his deathbed with a dreamy expression and half-lidded eyes.

When Alana had come over—and Will thought *he* struggled with social cues—Will couldn’t contain his jealousy. He hissed at her on the doorstep, wrapped his arms around Hannibal, paraded the Chesapeake Ripper as if he were no more than a slab of meat, a prize Will had won at the fair and was now traipsing about his house with childish glee.

Will realized what Hannibal felt like, then, making cannibal puns for years on end with no one but himself to enjoy them. There was something…viscerally satisfying about being in on a joke that no one else understood.

When Will responded to one of Hannibal's puns with his own (*Every inch, huh? Even the inside? Perhaps have a taste of my colon and kidneys?* ), Will had thought the man was going to spontaneously combust. Hannibal's eyes had gone black, his mouth had slackened at the corners, and something wild and frenzied had made its way into his thoughts. Will could see it, could sense it. His empathy was always on high alert around Hannibal, always desperate to pick up each and every cue, from the most minute twitch to the smallest sigh.

Will had grinned to himself—who wouldn't be proud at the sight of a monster like Hannibal shivering and whimpering at the mere mention of a taste—and then proceeded to lose his fucking mind beneath Hannibal's expert tongue.

The next day, Hannibal and Will had visited Abigail at the hospital. Will felt conflicted about the girl. She was not the same Abigail he had known—this Abigail was bolder, more prideful, unaware of just how mortal she was (just how easily the skin on her neck could be torn, the pieces of her face carved up on a whim and shoved down a throat).

Still, Will looked at the three of them together and could only think of the word *family*.

He wanted a family.

He wanted *them* to be a family.

And it seemed like, at least this time around, that Hannibal wanted the three of them to be a family, too.

Later the next day, Will had gotten a call from Jack Crawford that Tobias was dead. The man had been found in his cell with a bullet through the center of his forehead. Will had no idea who had killed him (Hannibal would never be so plebeian as to kill Tobias with a mere bullet), and it irked Will to no end that the script was changing yet again. It really was a butterfly effect; Hannibal had changed one conversation, had visited Will in his office once when he had not before, and now Will was getting into his car and racing to Baltimore. After all, whoever killed Tobias might also be on the hunt for the Chesapeake Ripper. And if they were, that might lead them to Hannibal.

Damn it all. Will just wanted one week, *one week* where someone was not trying to murder him or his partner. Was that really too much to ask?

So here Will is, pulling into the parking lot of Hannibal's ostentatious house (how no one has come to the conclusion that Hannibal is a serial killer when he literally decorates each and every surface of his home with bones and skulls, Will has no idea, but he suspects most people just assume Hannibal is a flamboyant and slightly homosexual European and move on).

Will sees another car parked down the road, this one clearly out of place in Hannibal's neighborhood. The car is at least twenty years old and is colored more with rust than paint at

this point. Frowning, Will slides out of his own Volvo and walks to Hannibal's front door.

He knocks, but there is no answer. Will presses his ear to the door and hears shouting, then the distinct sound of flesh being throttled.

Will quickly slips the spare key Hannibal had given him the other week out of his pocket and into the doorknob. He turns it, then opens the door slowly, just in case the fight on the other side is not going in Hannibal's favor and Will needs to try and rescue him.

Of course that is not the case.

Instead, Will opens the door to find Hannibal with a body thrown haphazardly over his shoulder, a litany of fresh bruises on his face. There's blood on the hardwood floor and an empty needle that's rolled to a stop near the front rug.

Hannibal looks at Will, and Will looks at Hannibal. Will can barely contain his amusement, desperate to see how Hannibal will try and talk his way out of this particular situation. Will takes a step inside, closes the door behind him.

Then Hannibal says the three words that change things forever (and not the three words that Will had been expecting, no, those words are still merely inside of their minds rather than sitting perched upon their tongues).

"I can explain."

# Chapter Twelve

Hannibal's heart will not stop pounding. It is an unfamiliar sensation, one that Hannibal refuses to become habituated to. He is usually so in control of every aspect of his body—from the rate of his heart to the depth of his breathing—that to have his heart skip and jump inside of his chest like some errant metal spring is enough to have him frowning as he tries to come up with an explanation as to why, exactly, he has a limp body slung over his shoulder.

"Okay," Will says, arms crossed over his chest. His feet are firmly planted on the rug in front of the door. "Explain."

Hannibal swallows. "May I set down the body?"

"I don't know," Will drawls. If Hannibal did not know better, he would say that Will looks… amused. Hannibal must certainly be reading his expressions wrong, for why would Will be amused in a situation such as this? Perhaps Will is going into shock and has no other recourse save to fall back on his favorite deflection tactic: humor. "Is this going to be a long explanation?"

"It could be," Hannibal concedes, mind still racing, still trying to discover a way to salvage the situation to his benefit without any more bloodshed. "Do I have your permission, then?"

Will huffs and stares at Hannibal's chin. "Since when have you ever needed my permission to do anything? But sure, yes. You can set the body down. Is it still alive?"

"Matthew is alive, yes," Hannibal says. He lays Matthew's body onto the hardwood floor without uttering a sound, his muscles well versed in lifting and lowering heavy objects. As Hannibal straightens again, he notes with some surprise that there is no fear in Will's scent. No terror or disgust. Only curiosity, an emotion that is sweet and vaguely floral.

"And who is Matthew?"

"Mathew Brown," Hannibal begins, his voice dipping into the particular cadence he uses with patients or while lecturing, "is an orderly at the BSHCI. Or rather was. I suppose killing Tobias Budge might have ended that particular vocation for him."

Will lowers his arms so they are no longer crossed over his chest. Hannibal relaxes slightly at the open body language. It means that, at least subconciously, the boy is receptive to what Hannibal has to say.

"Matthew came here immediately afterward. When I let him inside, he made an attempt on my life."

Will's stance shifts so that his legs are spread wider. His hands curl into fists at his sides, though not in aggression. No, Will is not feeling aggressive, he is feeling…protective. His body blocks the door, his eyes dart around the room for potential threats. Even his scent shifts into something more abrasive, like fresh pine rather than florals.

Will does not like the idea that someone came here to hurt Hannibal.

Hannibal preens, enamored with the weight of Will's regard.

He is certainly going to use it to his advantage.

"I am lucky that Matthew's skill in murder did not extend to my own person. He is sedated for now. The Temazepam I injected him with should last for another six or so hours, depending on the rate at which his body metabolizes the drug."

Will nods, digests this new piece of information. "So Matthew killed Tobias, then immediately came here. Why?"

Ah, this is where Hannibal's explanation gets precarious. He stares at Will and again feels as though the boy is…mocking him somehow. Taunting him. Playing with him as a cat swats at a colorful ball of yarn. A few more tugs and Hannibal will spill across the floor in an explosion of tangled string. "I am unsure," Hannibal eventually settles on. A lie, though one Hannibal hopes Will does not see. It has always been harder to lie to Will, his empathy providing him with insight that no other person has. Hannibal has always had to work more assiduously, had to tighten the stitches of his person suit until they tugged at his face just to ensure that Will could not tell when Hannibal was telling the truth or not. Will's empathy makes him dangerous.

It is one of the reasons Hannibal loves Will so much.

Will tugs on the bottom of his ear. He chews his lip, takes a step forward. Hannibal forces himself to remain standing where he is. He will not retreat, not from Will. Whatever action Will decides to take, Hannibal will accept it with grace.

"What are you going to do with him now?"

Hannibal glances down at Matthew's sprawled body, then looks back up at Will. "What do you think I should do?"

Will grins, and there is something…feral about the expression. It is the glint of his white teeth, perhaps, or the way his upper lip curls faintly into a snarl. "How very therapist of you, Dr. Lecter. I suppose the only thing we *should* do with Matthew's body is call Agent Crawford to come pick it up. Is that what you want?"

No, of course that is not what Hannibal wants.

"If that is what you wish," Hannibal demures.

Will blinks. He pauses, hands hanging limp by his sides.

He laughs.

The laughter is nearly manic. Loud and low and so powerful it shakes Will's entire body, mussing the curls on his head and rustling the fabric of his pants. He laughs, and cries, and then wipes the tears away from his cerulean eyes and laughs some more. Through it all,

Hannibal remains frozen, unsure what he could possibly say to help this situation (a situation which is not derailed, for it was never on the rails to begin with, not from the moment Will stepped, unexpectedly, through the front door of his home).

“I know,” Will finally says.

Hannibal tilts his head, confused. What does Will know?

Will’s laughter is gone, replaced with a kind of surety that Hannibal has hardly ever seen on the boy. It sends a spark of arousal shooting down Hannibal’s spine, the strength in Will’s voice, the conviction. “I *know*, Hannibal. I’ve always known. From the first moment I woke up on that damned day in April, I remembered. Everything. And what I remembered was terrifying. A monster had framed me for murder, and even a bullet in my brain couldn’t protect me from its reach. But you’re not the same monster I ran from, Hannibal. Are you?”

Hannibal, who has not moved a single millimeter during the entirety of Will’s confession, forces his tongue to unstick from the roof of his mouth. Forces words to come out when all that Hannibal feels like doing is pausing time so that he might process this sudden, seismic shift in his understanding of the world.

“No,” Hannibal whispers. “I’m not.”

“No,” Will agrees. His eyes soften, melt like the edges of a glacier against a warm southern current. “So I’m going to ask you again. Is that what you want? For me to call Jack Crawford here?”

Hannibal clears his throat and physically stops himself from reaching out for Will and pulling him close. “No, I do not want you to call Jack.”

“Good,” Will purrs. A shiver runs down Hannibal’s spine. “Then what *are* you going to do with Matthew?”

“Take him to my basement and dispose of him properly,” Hannibal replies.

There are no barriers, now. Will has completely and utterly annihilated Hannibal’s forts (forts which took decades to build and solidify) in only a matter of minutes.

“Show me,” Will commands. “I want to see how the Ripper rips.”

Hannibal shudders at the use of that name (his name, one of many), the way Will’s tongue curls around each syllable as it is finally spoken aloud. It is the first time he has ever heard Will call him by that particular moniker. It solidifies the moment, suspends it in thick-cut glass, a heavy ornament strung up and hung along the walls of Hannibal’s Mind Palace.

Hannibal—who usually plans for every eventuality, who is meticulous in his designs, who manipulates and moves people as easily as needle threads nylon through supple flesh—could *never* have predicted this scenario. Could never have predicted Will, remembering their past lives. Will, knowing Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will, trusting Hannibal despite it.

Tears well up behind Hannibal's eyes. He clears his throat, forces his emotions back beneath the stitchings of his person suit.

"Follow me," he says, a suggestion rather than a command. He will not command Will, not in this moment. Will has blossomed, bloomed, become the equal that Hannibal has always known he could be.

Will nods and watches with something akin to fascination as Hannibal lifts Matthew's unconscious body back into his arms and carries it to the pantry. Hannibal hears Will let out an amused snort at the reveal of the trap door hidden inside.

"Of course it would be in the pantry," Will mutters. "Only the freshest ingredients for Dr. Lecter."

Another shudder runs through Hannibal's body.

So Will knows about the cannibalism, too.

Does that mean Will had known the source of Hannibal's ingredients and still voluntarily ate each and every meal set before him? The thought causes a wave of arousal to run through Hannibal's body. The seam along the front of his trousers is suddenly unbearably tight. He shifts his hold on Matthew's body and ignores his arousal, walking down the steps of the basement until he reaches the bottom.

As soon as Hannibal steps onto the concrete floor, the automatic lights of the basement flicker on overhead—this is not, after all, the first time Hannibal has walked into the basement with his hands otherwise occupied. Hannibal strolls over to the metal surgical table in the middle of the room and none-too-gently sets Matthew's limp body onto the flat surface. The boy's wrists and ankles are quickly and efficiently strapped down—more so to prevent unwanted movement during organ removal than to prevent any attempt at escape. Hannibal is not concerned in the slightest about Matthew trying to get away. He will bleed out before the paralytic agent has even fully filtered through his blood stream.

Hannibal turns, finds Will staring with a blank face at the basement.

"It's bigger than I expected," Will admits. "I knew you would need a private space to work. Somewhere close. I should have known that you wouldn't settle for anything but the best." Will walks over to the metal table and runs a finger along the chrome. He lifts the finger to his face and stares at it, then scoffs. "Pristine."

"Otherwise the meat would spoil," Hannibal says, voice deep and gravelly. He is…unsure if the joke is allowed, if he is permitted to make light of the current situation. What is the proper etiquette for realizing one's significant other is aware of your illicit proclivities without knowing if they approve of said actions? Is Hannibal supposed to be apologizing? Denying? Coming up with excuses for the crimes he commits with relish?

"Of course," Will agrees, blithely. Unbothered by Hannibal's own insouciance**.** "What's next?"

Hannibal straightens his spine and walks over to one of the many cabinets surrounding the room. He opens the top drawer of one and selects a fresh pair of nitrile gloves as well as a surgical mask. After, Hannibal grabs a clean scalpel and a rib spreader, though he is still unsure which organs he will end up taking from the body currently lying on the surgical table. He supposes it depends entirely on whether Matthew's horrific aftershave has spread into his lungs. If it has, then the meat will most certainly be tainted, and Hannibal will have to take the boy's heart instead.

Hannibal sets down the gathered supplies next to the surgical table. He keeps his hands busy, his eyes focused on organizing the instruments rather than looking at Will.

"You do not have to stay," Hannibal says, perfectly happy to give Will one last out. "Your acceptance thus far has been more than enough. I could not deign to ask…that is…" Hannibal sighs, forces his tongue to cooperate. "I just wish for you to be happy, Will."

In the back of Hannibal's mind, he sees his aunt's face. The horror when she realized what Hannibal was. The disgust when she saw him, the true him, the monster hidden beneath the man. Hannibal will never forget the sheer potency of Murasaki's hatred (her fear) when Hannibal had slaughtered the final pig responsible for his sister's death. Murasaki had shunned immediately, and Hannibal vowed, then, to never let another see what lay beneath his skin.

It is the reason his person suit is so well-tailored. It has protected Hannibal, kept him safe in this world of sheep and pigs who could never possibly understand the transcendent hunger of a wolf. No one knew Hannibal, and though it was a lonely life, Hannibal was content.

And then he met Will.

Suddenly, simply walking as a predator amongst prey was no longer enough. Hannibal wanted to be *understood*. He wanted to be *seen.*

He wanted to be *loved*.

Even now, Hannibal wasn't sure if it was possible to have such a thing.

Will does not reply to Hannibal's offer. When Hannibal glances up from where he is unwrapping the scalpel, he sees that Will is deep in thought, eyes distant and glazed-over as his mind spins along a thousand different paths, each converging and weaving with no end in sight.

Eventually, Will notices Hannibal's weighted stare. Will sighs, face deliberately blank. He walks over to Hannibal, making sure to keep eye contact the entire time. He stops only a breath away from Hannibal, then reaches up to cup Hannibal's face in his hands. Hannibal relishes the feel of Will's rugged palms against his skin, delighted that the bandages and stitches are finally gone, and he can simply *feel* Will against him.

"I'm not doing this to prove something," Will says. "I'm not doing this to collect evidence against you or to make you uneasy. I'm doing this because I *want* to. Because the Ripper is a part of who you are, and I desperately want to know you, Hannibal. Each and every piece."

Tears stream down Hannibal's face. They collect in the wells and divots of Will's palms, warm and gentle against his skin. "But if you remember our past lives," Hannibal says, "then you must remember what happened. How *badly* I miscalculated."

"Shh," Will hushes. "What you did to me is still in my head, Hannibal. I remember each therapy session. Each lie. Each blatantly calculated manipulation. And I promise you, there will be a reckoning." Hannibal lets out a choked sob, both terrified and aroused in equal measure at the thought of Will's punishment. Will shushes him again, pets along the nape of his neck as if he were a dog in need of soothing. "But now is not the time for such things. I want you to unveil yourself for me. Can you do that?"

Hannibal breathes deeply in through his nose—relishing the scent of Will, sun-kissed skin and glacial water and *acceptance*—then lets the air out through his mouth. He repeats this process several times until he no longer feels as though he is on the verge of crying.

"Yes." His voice is meek. Hesitant. Not the voice of the Chesapeake Ripper, but the child forced to eat his own sister in order to survive. Hannibal was born a monster, yet until that harrowing moment, the beast had been hidden. Once unveiled, its bloodlust was all-consuming, and Hannibal has been chasing after the taste of flesh upon his tongue ever since.

"Good boy," Will coos.

Hannibal's knees go weak, and he clenches to Will's shoulders in order to stay upright.

Will smiles, something soft and sweet, and leads Hannibal over to Matthew's body.

"Show me," he whispers.

Hannibal takes a deep breath to steady himself. He straightens his spine, rolls his shoulders. His hands are sure and steady as they put on the pair of nitrile gloves and pick up the scalpel.

"The cuts I choose to make when harvesting depend entirely on which organs I am collecting," Hannibal begins. "It also depends on whether I am making a tableau of the swine, or simply gathering ingredients." He glances at Will from the corner of his eye, notes the way Will is leaning toward him rather than away, his face the picture of rapt attention. "In this case, Matthew will be providing his lungs, if they prove to be of good quality. Otherwise, I will be taking his heart."

"How do you know if his lungs are of good quality?" Will asks.

"An excellent question. I can smell disease, so if there is cancer or emphysema I will be able to scent it on the meat. The color and texture of the lungs is also imperative in determining their quality. Here, I worry most that Mr. Brown's horrific taste in aftershave will have damaged the organ. It nearly damaged my olfactory nerve, and I have only been in his presence for an hour."

Will chuckles, and Hannibal thinks he has never been happier.

He continues to explain his process to Will as he makes a Y-incision across Matthew's sternum. He inserts the rib spreader and then breaks open the thoracic cavity. The sound of it is a loud, resounding *crack* that echoes around the concrete room.

"Why did Matthew kill Tobias Budge?" Will asks Hannibal as he separates the trachea from the lungs, effectively ending Matthew's life. There is no need to prolong Matthew's suffering. Will may be amenable to murder at the moment, but Hannibal will not try and extend that acceptance to torture.

"Because I asked him to," Hannibal replies. "Tobias believed you to be the Ripper. That put you in danger. I decided the best way to eliminate any threat of you being incarcerated was to kill both Tobias and Matthew. Matthew had, in a most rude manner, listened in on my interview with Tobias at the BSHCI. When Tobias claimed you to be the Ripper, Matthew immediately believed him."

When Will laughs this time, it is much louder and completely relaxed. "Oh god, we *really* need to coordinate our stories sometime. Tobias only thought I was the Ripper because I was trying to protect *you*. He nearly killed you last time around. I couldn't let him find you, not again."

Hannibal turns to Will, hands dripping with blood, a scalpel clutched in his right hand. He is sure his face is completely besotted as he says, "The more souls who resonate together, the greater the intensity of their love, for mirror-like, each soul reflects the other."

"Hannibal, did you just confess your love to me by using a Dante quote?"

Hannibal sniffs and fiddles with the handle of the scalpel. "I suppose I did."

"God, you're so ridiculous. You're lucky that I love you, too."

Hannibal does not cry. He does not. He does, however, suddenly have the urge to wipe away some errant moisture that has gotten stuck in the corner of his eye. He refrains, only because that would be extremely unsanitary—and also because Hannibal has gotten blood in his eye before, and the sensation is not one which he would like to replicate again.

"I suppose I am," Hannibal replies.

He finishes removing Matthew's lungs with a grin.

As soon as the lungs are processed and put into the freezer, Hannibal turns back around to finish disposing of the body only to find Will is directly behind him. His scent is overwhelming, arousal burning beneath his skin, smoke-filled and musky.

"Hello," Hannibal whispers.

"Hi," Will greets back. He reaches up and runs a hand through Hannibal's hair, musses the soft strands so that they tangle and fall in front of his eyes. "Is that all you're taking from Matthew?"

“It is,” Hannibal breathes, scared to move, scared to blink, scared to even feel the pulse of his racing heart lest the sudden movement sends Will running away.

“Good,” Will says, and then he is on Hannibal, kissing him, sliding his fingers into the hair at the nape of Hannibal’s neck and pulling him closer, licking into Hannibal’s mouth with a ferocity that stuns and excites Hannibal in equal measure.

Will pushes Hannibal backward until he hits the row of cabinets lining the wall. Will’s lips never leave his, his expert tongue sliding along Hannibal’s in a wet, messy kiss that leaves Hannibal lightheaded. With a firm shove, Will forces Hannibal to sit on top of the counter, then straddles him so that both of Will’s knees are resting on either side of Hannibal’s pelvis.

“*Will*,” Hannibal groans. He raises his hands to take off his soiled gloves, but Will stops him midway, eyes black.

“Leave them,” he hisses.

Hannibal stares at Will, stunned.

“What?” Will asks. He rolls his hips, erection grinding down into Hannibal’s own.

“I am simply…surprised,” Hannibal says, breathless. “Forgiving me my crimes is one thing. Partaking in them alongside me is another.”

“It wasn’t an easy decision,” Will confesses, hips still rolling in an endless downward spiral that has Hannibal seeing stars. “When I first realized I had traveled back through time, I was too angry at you to even think about changing our story. I followed along with the script I knew, for the most part, trying to keep my moral compass strictly north. But then I thought, if everyone I know and trust is so easily convinced that I am a dangerous criminal, I might as well, you know, *commit some fucking crime*.”

Hannibal lets out a noise—it is most certainly *not* a whine—and pulls Will closer, crushing the boy to his chest. His blood-soaked gloves stick to the fabric of Will’s shirt. It will need to be destroyed after today, and Hannibal preemptively mourns the loss of such a memento (physical proof of Will’s desire to be with Hannibal in every way that one soul can join with another).

Will’s mouth is ravenous as it travels from Hannibal’s lips, down to his chin, then to the underside of his jaw. Will bites and nips at the sensitive skin. His teeth dig in, leave marks and bruises. Blood rises beneath each mark, and Hannibal wishes he had a mirror to see the attestation that Will *wants* Hannibal, that Will *loves* Hannibal.

“I want you inside me,” Will growls out.

“My bed is—”

“No,” Will interrupts. “Here. Now. I’m not waiting any longer, Hannibal.”

“It will be your first experience with penetration,” Hannibal reminds him.

“You think I don’t know that?” Will snarks. He pulls back from Hannibal only enough to begin unbuttoning the front of his short-sleeve flannel shirt. Hannibal watches, enraptured, as inch after precious inch of sun-kissed skin is revealed before his eyes. Will’s body writhes as he tosses the shirt to the floor, torso undulating as he continues to rub his clothed erection against Hannibal’s own.

Hannibal reaches up to remove his own shirt, but Will bats his gloved hands away and undoes the buttons himself. When Hannibal’s button-down is pushed from his shoulders—and, subsequently, thrown to the floor—Will frowns at the white undershirt he finds lying beneath and literally rips the fabric from Hannibal’s body.

“I am sensing you have a personal vendetta against clothing,” Hannibal says, gripping Will’s hips in an attempt to gain balance. His gloves leave bloody handprints along Will’s side, dark crimson against endlessly smooth tan skin. “I may have to take you shopping after this to replace what we both have lost.”

“I prefer us with less clothing,” Will says. “There are no barriers between us. Not anymore.” He unzips Hannibal’s trousers and pulls his aching erection out of the slit of his silk boxers. Hannibal hisses at the sudden contact, unsurprised at how much precum is already leaking from the swollen head.

Will’s own pants are quickly discarded along with his boxers. He whines at the contact between their bare shafts, clutching his hand around the base of their erections and sliding them together in a slow, wet grind. Hannibal can feel the fresh scars on Will's palms as he grabs their shafts. The puckered skin adds another layer of sensation beyond touch (a phsyical reminder that Will is willing to *die* for Hannibal, to hurt his own precious body just to keep Hannibal safe).

“I want you inside me,” Will says, breathless. “You’ve already carved out a place for yourself in my mind. I want to fill the emptiness in my body, too.”

Hannibal moans and nods his head. Again, he reaches to take off the bloody gloves, but again, Will stops him before they are removed.

“Will, it is highly unsanitary to copulate when there are fluids present from a third party.”

Will snorts and buries his face in the curve of Hannibal’s throat, right in the angle of his jaw. “Can you smell any diseases in Matthew’s blood?”

“No, but—”

Will pulls back, eyes half-lidded with arousal (and a smattering of impatience). “Then stop fucking talking and start…fucking.”

Hannibal gives Will a reproving look at the uncouth language, but the effect is somewhat negated by his current appearance (mussed hair, gloved hands, and a straining cock sticking obscenely from the pouch of his boxers). “Very well.” Hannibal reaches behind Will and grips his firm cheeks, indulgently massaging them for a moment before sliding his pointer

finger down into the crevice between. Will shudders as Hannibal rubs along his perineum, then strokes over his rim.

“Do it,” Will groans, pushing back into Hannibal’s hand.

Hannibal pushes his finger in all the way to the second knuckle. The blood is mostly dry, tacky, nowhere near close to resembling a proper lubricant, but Will doesn’t seem to mind. He moans and writhes on Hannibal’s finger as if it is the only thing keeping him upright.

Hannibal massages Will’s inner walls for a moment. He finds Will’s prostate, the gland swollen and sensitive inside of the boy. Hannibal runs the pad of his finger over it and watches with fascination as Will *screams*, entire body shuddering around the miniscule movement.

“Another,” Will says, panting.

Hannibal keeps his other arm firmly wrapped around Will’s waist as he presses in a second finger. Will winces at the sudden intrusion, but the scent of his arousal only burns brighter for the pain. Hannibal scissors Will’s rim until it has loosened enough for a third digit to slip inside.

“*Hannibal*,” Will whines. “I want—I need your hands on me.”

Hannibal leans down and licks up a bead of sweat that has dripped from Will’s face onto his neck. The salty tang of the sweat is mixed with Will’s unique musk, and Hannibal’s eyes nearly roll back into his head at the exquisite taste. “Very well, darling.”

Hannibal removes the bloody gloves, throwing them to the basement floor without thought to where they might land. He runs one of his sweat-slick palms across Will’s bare chest, catching his thumb along one of the rosy nipples. He first plucks one, then the other, delighted by the mewl that this draws from Will’s slack mouth.

Hannibal lifts his hand to Will’s mouth and presses the tips of his fingers against Will’s bright red lips. “Suck,” he commands, voice like gravel.

Will immediately obeys, sucking the proffered digits into his mouth and then licking along Hannibal’s palm. Satisfied, Hannibal wraps his wet palm around his aching shaft and spreads the saliva along his cock. The saliva, mixed with the copious amount of precum leaking from the head, will provide some lubrication but certainly not enough to prevent Will from feeling Hannibal enter him.

Hannibal thinks that Will prefers it this way.

Hannibal prefers it this way, too, though he supposes he prefers any and all contact with Will. The boy could stick a knife in Hannibal’s chest and carve out his heart and Hannibal would thank him for the privilege.

Shaking, Hannibal grabs Will’s thighs and pulls him closer so that the head of Hannibal’s cock is nestled at the edge of his rim. Hannibal rubs the leaking head across Will’s entrance,

enjoying the drag of skin against skin, ready to gently guide himself into Will for the first time.

Before Hannibal can so much as blink, Will slams himself onto Hannibal's shaft all the way to the hilt on the first try.

Both Hannibal and Will at the sudden change.

"God," Will slurs, thighs trembling as he lifts himself up and slams back down again. "It's so *fucking big*."

Hannibal feels syncope creeping up on the edges of his vision like a dark shadow hiding in the corners of his mind.

He is inside Will.

Will, who has proved yet again to be the most unpredictable, unthinkable, unknowable enigma, a force to be reckoned with, the one equal in Hannibal's life. Will, who has chosen Hannibal despite his past failings, who *loves* Hannibal despite his differences. Will, the only thing Hannibal would ever fight for. Will, who Hannibal is currently *inside of*, filling up in every way possible, grinding into the tight heat of him, the silken vice that contains the heavens and nirvana and every afterlife that the ancient philosophers were searching for.

Hannibal can barely see through the pleasure, but he forces his eyes to focus, to take in the sight of Will riding Hannibal's cock. Will's curly hair is soaked through with sweat, matted against his forehead and plastered to the nape of his neck. Droplets of sweat bead along his throat and glide down his slick torso, skin shining as Will writhes and grinds. Will's eyes are heavy-lidded, black lashes lowered as he stares at Hannibal's own mouth. Will's entire body is flushed a light pink, from the part along his scalp down to the tops of his toes.

Hannibal has never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

"How does it feel?" Hannibal asks. He grips Will's waist and helps the boy ride him, his biceps flexing and contracting in order to lift Will up and then ram him back down onto Hannibal's cock. "Tell me," Hannibal pleads.

Will's eyelids flutter closed, and he tilts his head back so that the long, lean line of his neck is exposed to Hannibal's hungry gaze. "S'good. So full. Feels like I'll always be empty, now, after this. Without you inside me."

Hannibal growls, something wounded and shaking, and increases the pace of his thrusts. The basement fills with the sound of their coupling, the slick slide of skin on skin, the gratuitous moans and mewls from both, the creaking of the countertop as it struggles to support the ferocity of their rutting.

"You'll never be empty again," Hannibal promises. "I'll fill you as much as you wish, as much as you can take. Over and over again until your body is finally satiated, filled to the brim with my seed."

Will lets out a choked-off gasp and comes all over Hannibal's stomach. Thick, hot pulses of cum that drip down into Hannibal's pubic hair and mix with the precum from his own cock. Hannibal thrusts up once, twice, then buries himself as deep inside of Will as he can, gripping the boy's waist tight and nuzzling along Will's collarbone as Hannibal rides out the most powerful orgasm he has ever experienced.

They sit like that for a moment, breathing completely synchronized, sweat cooling along their spines and scalps. Will hums and kisses the top of Hannibal's head, lips delicate as they graze his scalp. The gesture is so tender, so pure after such a carnal moment that Hannibal feels tears prick the corners of his eyes, unbidden but not unwelcome.

Will eventually slides off of Hannibal's lap with a low groan and a frown. Hannibal watches with rapt eyes as his seed begins to drip from Will's hole. It trickles down Will's thigh, pale and pearlescent, before drying along the back of his knee.

"I'm a mess," Will says. "And so are you. What are we going to do with the rest of Matthew's body?"

Hannibal's heart leaps at that word. *We*.

Their first body to dispose of together.

Hannibal could not be more proud.

"Hannibal?"

Hannibal sighs, enamored with Will's version of a post-orgasmic glow (discussing murder is always a sure way to Hannibal's heart), then gracefully lifts himself off of the countertop. His back twinges, but Hannibal ignores the pain as he bends over to pick up the clothing that litters the floor.

"I have a barrel of sodium hydroxide down one of those tunnels," Hannibal says, straightening. He points south, toward where two tunnels branch off from the main room and disappear into darkness.

"I am assuming then that this is not the first body you've dissolved?" Will asks, arms crossing over his chest.

"It is not," Hannibal says.

Will rolls his eyes and walks, completely nude, up the steps of the basement and into the pantry. Hannibal follows behind at a leisurely pace, content to take in the view he is afforded. Will's muscles are sculpted and lean, and his backside is certainly no exception. Will turns at the top of the staircase, notices Hannibal's staring, and gives him an unimpressed look (which is no less effective despite the cum and blood smeared along the base of Will's spine).

They both end up in Hannibal's shower. Hannibal enjoys cleaning Will, hands roaming over every inch of skin he can find, caressing Will's calves and massaging the tense muscles he finds hidden beneath.

Afterward, they lay together in Hannibal's bed, completely bare.

"Why did you have to kill Abigail?" Will asks, voice so quiet that Hannibal has to lean in closer in order to hear. "I understand framing me—not that I approve, obviously—but the Chesapeake Ripper has a strong survival instinct, and I was the perfect candidate to take the fall. Abigail, though…" Tears well up in Will's eyes, clouds covering the sea-blue of his irises. "She deserved better."

Hannibal swallows the lump in his throat. "Abigail did not die last time, darling."

"What?" Will's eyes narrow, trace over the lines of Hannibal's face as if searching for the lie hidden beneath his flesh. "I did not hallucinate her ear, Hannibal. I told you I remembered everything. That includes the tube you stuck inside my throat to plant it there."

"Yes, the ear was real, but it was donated, not taken. I made a deal with Abigail Hobbs. She would help frame you, and in return I would provide her with a new identity. She would never be able to live anything resembling a normal life without a change. Her father's crimes would cast a shadow over her own reputation that not even the brightest light could disperse. She agreed to the bargain, and her ear and blood were the token price."

Will is silent. Hannibal watches a myriad of emotions cross over his face, ranging from distress to anger to relief. Hannibal accepts each one in turn, knowing that whatever emotion Will eventually settles on, it will be Hannibal's privilege to witness.

"I don't know if that makes it better or worse," Will whispers. "Was that your final plan, then? Leave me to rot in prison and go back to psychiatry? Perhaps a phone call to Abigail once a month to make sure she is not disparaging your name across the country? It seems so…uninspired."

"Of course not, Mylimasis. From the first moment I laid eyes on you, something inside of me…shifted. The feelings you inspired in me were unknown. Untested. At first, I did not know what to do with regard to how I felt about you. I had never experienced such a thing in my life. My psychiatrist, Dr. Du Maurier, called me obsessed. The word is trite, but no less untrue for it. When I discovered your encephalitis, it truly seemed a path had opened up before my very eyes. The perfect opportunity to help you build the chrysalis that would guide your becoming. I did not think…it did not seem possible that you could love me, the true me, without some sort of influence on my part. I never anticipated that it would end in you taking your own life. For that, I will never forgive myself."

Will sighs and wraps an arm around Hannibal's waist, draws him closer so that both of them are lying on the same pillow, noses nearly touching. "I know how I ended up here, but how did you?"

"I assume you are referring to this timeline rather than my bed."

The look Will gives Hannibal could dry up the most verdant of blooms. "Obviously."

"Obviously." Hannibal clears his throat. "I lived but a few days longer after your passing before taking my own life. Those few days were the most harrowing I have ever

experienced.” Even now, Hannibal recalls the way food had turned to ash inside of his mouth, the way sounds had become muted, colors grayed, everything drained void of any pleasure or happiness without Will there at his side. “When I woke, it was also on April 4th.”

Will sighs and nuzzles his head beneath Hannibal’s chin. His wet hair sticks to Hannibal’s skin, curls lightly caressing the side of Hannibal’s face. They smell of Hannibal’s shampoo, of honeyed pleasure, of a deep-seated contentment that Hannibal is not sure that he has ever smelled on Will before.

“I love you,” Hannibal whispers. “My darling boy. You must never leave me, not now. I would not survive the separation."

Sleepily, Will mumbles back, "Neither of us would."

# Chapter Thirteen

The day of Abigail's release finds Hannibal and Will standing in the lobby of Port Haven, hands linked, both dressed in loose-fitting clothing in a vain attempt to combat the relentless heat. In Will's other hand is clutched a blue and white gift bag, the crumpled tissue paper peeking over the top as if it, too, is eagerly awaiting Abigail's presence.

"Breathe, darling," Hannibal gently reminds Will.

Will sends Hannibal a scathing look that only makes Hannibal smile and squeeze Will's fingertips inside of his own.

Inside the lobby of Port Haven, Alana emerges from one of the many busy hallways. She sees them, sees their linked hands. A pang of longing crosses her face before it is quickly replaced with a false smile. "Hello Hannibal. Will."

"Alana," Will greets. "Where is Abigail?"

"Changing. She's tried on at least four separate outfits this morning alone."

"A nervous gesture, but not a necessary one," Hannibal says. "Abigail will be well taken care of."

Alana sighs and frowns. "I have strong faith in you, Hannibal. I had only hoped she would be further along in her treatment before her release today. She still refuses to participate during group therapy, and her one-on-one sessions with me have not gone much better."

Just then, as though summoned by the mention of her name, Abigail comes walking down the hallway and into the lobby. She's wearing a dark green maxi dress and faux leather sandals. A duffel bag is slung over her right shoulder. Her hair is pulled back into a low ponytail, and like before, Hannibal is struck at how much more confident this Abigail is compared to the one he knew; her unblemished neck has altered more than just her physical appearance.

"Abigail," Will greets, a large smile breaking out over his face. "Ready to go home?"

Abigail returns his smile, eyeing the gift in his hand with interest. "I can't believe I'm willingly going to live with a psychiatrist, but yes. I'm ready."

Hannibal sighs, more amused than anything, and holds tightly to Will as they walk out into the scalding sun. The paperwork for Abigail's discharge had been completed and faxed to Port Haven a few days ago. Now, all that is left to do is take Abigail home.

"I like your dress," Will tells Abigail once they are all seated in the Bentley. Hannibal smoothly pulls out of the parking lot and onto the highway, heading west toward Baltimore. "Is it new?"

Abigail rolls her eyes, her annoyance a clear mask for her anxiety. Hannibal can smell it, acidic and sharp, as it fills the interior of the car. He nearly rolls down a window to clear the air, but the car is driving too fast for such a thing to be comfortable on their ears. “Oh god, please tell me Alana didn’t mention my wardrobe changes today.”

Will smiles and turns around so that he is facing Abigail. “I won’t lie to you: she did. Don’t worry, though. I completely understand the feeling. Did you know I changed my outfit over six times for the first dinner party of Hannibal’s that I attended?”

“And he was also several hours late,” Hannibal says, smirking at the dirty look Will sends his way. “Lucky for him, I find I am eager to forgive any and all of his trespasses, even those that deprive me of his company.”

Abigail grins at Will. “Is that true? How rude of you, Will.”

Will huffs and grumbles something about Hannibal and Abigail being a perfect match for each other beneath his breath.

“I heard you have seven dogs,” Abigail says. “Can I meet them?”

Will instantly turns back around, a look of near manic glee in his eyes. “You like dogs?”

Oh dear. Now there are two of them.

“I *love* them,” Abigail responds. “Never had one growing up. Dad said animals were for hunting, not for keeping as a pet. Mom agreed, but I think secretly she wanted a dog, too. What kind of dogs are they? And how on earth did you get so many?”

The hour drive to Hannibal’s home is spent with Will and Abigail competing as to who has more affection for dogs (Will may have seven furry companions to stake his claim as king of the canines, but what Abigail lacks in personal experience she makes up for in youthful exuberance). Hannibal listens to it with a calm happiness unbeknownst to him in his previous life, offering the occasional tidbit of arbitrary canine trivia he has gleaned over the years.

Once home, Hannibal takes Abigail’s duffel bag inside and up to the guest bedroom he has selected for her (a room close to his own, but still with enough doors and walls between them that the girl will not be traumatized when Hannibal and Will are intimate; Will has proven to be much more vocal in bed than Hannibal had anticipated, not that he is complaining in the slightest).

Abigail comes upstairs and looks around her new room with wide eyes. The light from the open window catches in her blue gaze, turning her irises a stunning shade of cobalt. She sees Hannibal looking at her and blushes, tilts her head down to appear demure.

“It’s gorgeous,” she tells Hannibal. “Sure as hell a lot nicer than my old room, anyway.”

“Language,” Hannibal chides. He smiles at her and gestures to the hallway. “Would you care for some lunch?”

Abigail's pupils dilate with excitement. Her heart rate ticks up, and Hannibal can smell the anticipation boiling inside of her veins. "What is it?"

"*Porchetta umbra*. A dish taught to me by my aunt many years ago. It is made of pork belly stuffed with garlic, salt, pepper, and wild fennel. The swine's offal is also chopped and added inside to richen the flavor."

"Did you hunt for the pork yourself?"

Hannibal grins at Abigail, all teeth. "The pork belly is from a local butcher. The offal, however, was provided by me. This particular pig was caught only last week."

"Does Will know that you…catch your own meat?"

"My dear Abigail, Will helped harvest the animal himself."

Abigail's eyes widen with shock. "I didn't know he hunted."

"It is a recent development. You will find that Will's palette expands more and more with each passing day."

Abigail clears her throat and fiddles with the hem of her sleeve. "What did you do? With the rest of the pig?"

"Disposed of it," Hannibal says. "I had no use for anything but its lungs."

Abigail frowns. She bites her bottom lip.

"Come now," Hannibal chides, "there is no need to keep secrets between us, not anymore. Say what you must."

"You didn't honor every part of him," Abigail says in a rush. "That's so…wasteful."

Hannibal nods, accepting her criticism, and stares out of the bedroom window. It faces his backyard, and he allows himself a moment to enjoy the view—lush grass trimmed to a respectable length, a large oak tree to provide shade during the evening hours, and a stone path that leads from one end of the yard to the other.

"Your father had a very specific view on hunting. I will not tell you your father was wrong. I will not tell you your father was right. I will simply tell you that there are many viewpoints in this world, and only the narrow-minded look to one in order to make a decision."

Abigail drops the sleeve of her dress and gives Hannibal a tentative smile. He returns the expression, leads Abigail back downstairs and toward the kitchen. Together, the two of them prepare lunch side by side. Abigail minces the garlic and chops the fennel while Hannibal wraps the pork belly with twine and washes the offal. Will sits on a bar stool at the counter, content to watch rather than participate.

"Will, could you fetch a Montefalco Sagrantino to go with our lunch? There is an excellent vintage near the bottom of the wine shelf, a 2005 I believe."

Will slips from the stool and goes into the pantry, then to the locked back room where the wine (and an industrial-strength table saw) are located. As soon as he is out of earshot, Abigail turns to Hannibal and asks, “Does Will know that you’re the Chesapeake Ripper?” Her face is flushed with anxiety and nerves. Clearly it has taken her the entire hour since they have arrived to work up the courage to ask this particular question.

Hannibal smirks and continues slicing the pork. “He does. You’re a clever girl, Abigail. I hope that you can use such skills to your benefit rather than your detriment.”

Abigail, sensing the threat in Hannibal’s words, ducks her chin and goes back to mincing the garlic.

Will returns with the wine and, sensing the shift in mood, decides to turn on Hannibal’s speakers to play a rather horrific country playlist. When Will begins singing along to one of the songs, Hannibal instantly changes his mind on the quality of the music. The playlist is wonderful, terrific actually. Perhaps better than the opera. Hannibal would listen to it again and again. Anything to hear Will’s low, throaty voice humming along to what must be a familiar tune.

Hannibal is half-hard the rest of their time in the kitchen, all from the sound of Will’s voice. Hannibal should be ashamed (should be many things, perhaps) but all he can feel is an overwhelming fondness for the scruffy profiler in front of him.

After lunch, Will grabs the crinkled gift bag from off the table and hands it to Abigail. She removes the tissue paper with sure hands, eagerly looking inside the bag. Her brow quirks for a moment as she draws out the package, then she smiles. Will visibly relaxes at her reaction; clearly she is not faking her excitement, otherwise Will’s empathy would read the false smile on her lips and the poor boy would be left with the bitter aftertaste of a gift not well-received.

“It’s a fly-tying kit,” Will explains. “I thought you might like to come fishing with me. There’s a stream behind Wolf Trap that I like to visit. The dogs can come too, though there won’t be as much fishing if they decide to get in the water.”

“Thank you,” Abigail says, and Hannibal thinks her gratitude is for more than just the gift.

Will goes home to take care of his pack and work on lesson plans for his students. He gives Hannibal an absolutely filthy kiss against the front door before leaving, and Hannibal’s entire mouth continues to feel flushed and swollen long after Will has left for Baltimore.

“What are you going to do now?” Abigail asks. She is perched on the bench of the harpsichord, thin fingers resting lightly against the ivory keys.

“I took the liberty of canceling all of my appointments for the day. My time is yours to command, Abigail.”

Abigail tilts her head and stares at Hannibal with piercing eyes. “What if I wanted to go hunting?”

Hannibal primly sits on the leather armchair in front of the empty fireplace, crosses one ankle over the other. “Is that something you desire?”

Abigail sighs and slumps her shoulders. Hannibal can see the war inside of her: the need to please Hannibal, the person who is capable of helping or destroying her future, and her own innate desires and wants. Eventually, Abigail settles on, “I’m not sure.”

“Then we will wait until you are. There is no requirement to hunt while you live here. My only request is that you keep my life, and subsequently Will’s, in mind when you are talking with others. I will not hesitate to keep Will safe, no matter what that entails.”

Abigail nods her head. “Yeah, of course. I would never turn you two in.”

“Never is a very long time. I would be careful with what promises you make. I want us to have a productive relationship, Abigail. I hope you do, too.”

“I do,” Abigail whispers. Tears well up in her eyes, real but exaggerated in order to tug on Hannibal’s empathy. Abigail will soon learn that Hannibal’s empathy is stunted, unimpressed with the manipulations of others. There is but one person whose tears would move Hannibal, and he is currently an hour away, no doubt surrounded by a pack of slobbering dogs who ache for his company almost as much as Hannibal does.

“Excellent. Then we are agreed.” Hannibal allows the silence to grow, swell for a moment before saying, “If you are amenable, I would like to take you shopping for a new wardrobe.”

Abigail snorts and glances down at the dress she is wearing. Hannibal can smell the cheap polyester from here, the synthetic fabric full of more chemicals than any of the cleaners Hannibal keeps inside of his home. “Is that your way of saying you hate my clothes?”

“I think you are a beautiful young woman, and the clothing you wear should compliment you as such.”

“I don’t have money for new clothes. Dr. Bloom gave me a stack of gift cards, but I already used them to buy what I have.”

“I would never ask you to come shopping with me and then expect you to pay. The clothing will be my gift to you.”

“Oh.” Abigail looks stunned. She blinks once, twice. “That’s awfully nice of you, Dr. Lecter.”

“Just Hannibal, if you please. We are living under the same roof after all.”

Abigail nods, and Hannibal stands, puts on the linen suit jacket he prefers on hot days such as this, and leads Abigail into the Bentley. They chat of nothing consequential during their outing. Hannibal takes the girl to one of his favorite boutiques, then his personal tailor. Abigail is unsure at first, clearly out of her depth in such fine establishments, but with a little encouragement from Hannibal she quickly grows more and more bold with her desires.

“That one,” Abigail says, pointing to a forest green fabric not unlike the current color of her dress (though the quality difference between what she is wearing and what she is looking at cannot be overstated). “I think it would make a nice top.”

“An excellent choice,” Hannibal commends. His cell phone begins vibrating inside of his pocket. He excuses himself from Abigail, then walks over to the corner of the shop where there are dozens of bolts of fabric and no customers. “Hello?”

“Dr. Lecter? I need your help.” Jack’s gruff voice hits Hannibal’s ears like a pointed needle, piercing through the calm of his afternoon.

“Agent Crawford,” Hannibal says. “How can I be of service?”

“Will called this afternoon. Said he is quitting his job as a consultant and refusing to take on any more cases.”

Hannibal pauses, waits for the inevitable request. When Jack refuses to ask outright, Hannibal responds, “I am happy to serve as a consultant on any new cases now that Will is no longer available.”

Jack sighs, the sound of it crackling against the receiver. “I was hoping you might persuade him otherwise. Will just needs to get his head on straight and face the facts; without his empathy, the BAU isn’t near as effective. Lives will be lost without him serving on our team. He needs to come back.”

Hannibal glances over at Abigail. She tilts her head, curious as to whom he is speaking, then continues browsing through fabric swatches. “I am sorry Jack, truly, but if Will has given his notice then there is nothing I can do on the matter. The work he was doing as a consultant was important, yes, but detrimental to his physical and mental health. I cannot help but feel as if this is an improvement rather than an impediment.”

“It’s an impediment to me,” Jack growls. “I am counting on you, Dr. Lecter. I hope you won’t disappoint.” With one last sigh, Jack hangs up, leaving Hannibal with the overwhelming urge to track down the infernal man and separate his intestines from his abdomen, once and for all.

“Is everything alright?” Abigail peers up at Hannibal, hands clutching a few of the fabric samples she has picked out for her new clothing. “Who was that? Your eyes went all tight around the edges.”

Hannibal is struck once more by how *perceptive* Abigail is.

She truly is like the daughter he and Will would produce if they were able to do such a thing —not that something as petty as biology stops them from trying. Hannibal allows Will to fill him with his seed time and again; he would be more than happy if it stuck, took root inside of him and bloomed into something beautiful.

“Agent Crawford is a very persistent man,” Hannibal says. “And one I do not wish to discuss further, lest it ruin what remains of our outing. Have you finished making your selections?”

Abigail nods, and Hannibal leads her to the back counter to pay for the items. After, they stop at one of Hannibal's favorite cafés for iced tea and pastries, then go home.

Hannibal texts Will once they arrive. He lets Will know that Agent Crawford called and asked Hannibal to guilt Will into joining the BAU once more.

*I'm not surprised.* Is Will's reply. *Jack wouldn't know "no" if it slapped him across the head and pissed in his boot.*

A rather vulgar metaphor, but fitting.

Hannibal and Will continue to text until it is late in the evening, far past the time that Hannibal would normally be awake. He stares at the screen of his phone and presses his fingertips into the black text, wishing it were Will beside him rather than the digital echo of his thoughts.

The next few weeks find Hannibal…content. Abigail is a welcome presence in his home—as long as she does not bring home any of the highly-processed, chemical-laden snacks she cheerfully refers to as *ding dongs*—and Will visits often, nearly every night, that Hannibal can pretend it is enough (it's not).

Of course the contentment does not last.

It all ends with a single text.

*Abel Gideon has escaped.*

Hannibal peers down at his phone, frowns. The text was sent by Jack Crawford nearly an hour ago, while Hannibal was otherwise occupied with preparing dinner for himself and Abigail. Though he knew Gideon's escape was imminent, it had not been at the forefront of his mind. Still, it is no matter. Hannibal knows where Gideon will go, and that makes the escapee vulnerable. Hannibal will snatch the man, bring him down to Hannibal's basement, and keep him close until the time is right to use him against Chilton.

"Hannibal?"

Hannibal sighs and places his phone back into the pocket of his suit jacket. He straightens the cuffs of his sleeves, eyeing the empty chair next to him (Will's chair) with undisguised longing. "Apologies, Abigail. That was terribly rude of me. I normally am careful about not bringing my phone to the table."

"No, it's fine. Was that Jack Crawford?"

"What gave it away?"

"Your mouth went all tight again. You only ever look that way when it's Jack on the other end of the line. Like you sucked on a lemon."

Hannibal smiles and swirls his glass of sauvignon blanc, noting the dry acidity of the lime and gooseberry. He sips, feels his tongue immediately tense at the sharpness of the flavor,

then relaxes his jaw. “I enjoy the taste of lemon, actually.”

Abigail rolls her eyes and stabs a piece of kale with more force than is necessary. “I think you completely missed the point.”

“On purpose, I assure you. Jack Crawford will not upset our dinner. Not this evening, at least.”

They finish eating in silence, and just as Hannibal stands to take his empty plate and half-full glass of wine to the kitchen, his phone is buzzing once more inside of his pocket. He rolls his shoulders and takes it out, surprised to see Will’s name.

“Hello?”

“Hannibal, did Jack tell you? Gideon’s out.”

“Yes, I received the news through a rather underwhelming text. Are you well, darling? You sound strained.”

Will laughs, sharp and short. “No, I’m not *well*. I can hardly remember what happened last time around with Gideon. My mind was soup by then. I think it trickled out of my ears and onto your kitchen floor. Garrett Jacob Hobbs was more real to me in those moments than you.”

Hannibal winces at the reminder of his failure. He clears his throat and sets his plate into the sink. “And for that I will never forgive myself.” A pause. Then, “You have nothing to fear. You did not consult on Gideon’s case. There is no reason for Gideon to target you.”

“I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about you. If Gideon follows the same path as last time, this will end up with Chilton and Lounds stuck inside of the observatory with a gift basket of intestines.”

“A gift I did not accept.”

Will’s huff of breath is less than amused. “I’m coming over. I don’t…I can’t be alone right now.”

“Nothing would please me more than your presence, darling.”

Another huff, this one embarrassed (yet pleased). “I’ll see you in an hour.”

Hannibal puts away his phone, then begins washing his plate. Behind him, Abigail creeps into the kitchen. She hands Hannibal her plate and dries them both when Hannibal is finished washing. There is a gratifying sort of equanimity to their routine, and Hannibal is surprised that something as banal as washing dishes has further endeared him to the girl at his side.

“Is Will coming over?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says, patting his hands onto a clean towel. He refills his glass of wine, then gestures for Abigail to follow him into the study. He lights a fire inside of the hearth even

though the July heat does not require any help in warming the room. After, he sits at the bench of his harpsichord and works on his latest composition—a sonata inspired by piercing blue eyes and wind-swept curls—while Abigail reads one of the novels required for her English literature class this fall.

It was a hard decision, whether to go to college here in Baltimore or study somewhere else (or not study at all; college is not the only option for young adults, no matter what the current consensus says). Abigail, Will, and Hannibal had spent many hours debating the merits of Abigail staying where she will be potentially recognized or traveling far away where she will be freer but have less support. Abigail eventually settled on staying local rather than studying abroad; without her scar, this version of Abigail is much more capable of blending in with the crowd of her peers.

Hannibal is proud of her. Though her becoming is not as glorious as Will's, it is still gratifying to witness.

In the distance, Hannibal hears the turn of a key in the front door, then the heavy shuffling of feet down the hall. He smiles to himself as his fingers continue to glide over ivory keys, giddy at the thought of Will using the key to Hannibal's house (yet another show of trust between them).

"Hello," Hannibal greets once Will enters the room. Will smells of petrichor, of roiling storm clouds, of the heavy scent of ozone before a lightning strike. His muscles are tense and rigid as he stands in the doorway. His eyes, normally a light shade of cerulean, now seem almost black.

"Hi," Will greets tersely.

Abigail shuts the book she was reading, looks at Hannibal and Will, then gives a rather dramatic fake yawn. "I am going up to bed. Goodnight. It was nice to see you, Will."

Will's eyes soften as he looks to Abigail, and he steps aside to allow her to leave the room.

Then it is only him and Hannibal.

"Come in, Will. There is no need to lurk in the doorway."

Will rolls his eyes and stomps over to the armchair in front of the fireplace. He slouches against the leather, shoes still on, legs spread wide in front of him. Hannibal aches to kneel on the rug, lay his head against Will's firm thigh, nose the juncture between Will's pelvis and smell the musk of his skin.

They sit in silence for a long while. Hannibal is content to wait, posture completely perfect as he sits on the edge of the bench. His eyes trace Will's face, noting the length of the scruff on his chin, the plushness of his pink lips, the wrinkles in the collar of his flannel top.

Finally, Will says, "I…I remember a black stag. It led me to the observatory. It was the very creature that had haunted my dreams for months. I was so convinced it was a friend. An ally. Now, I think it might have been a representation of you."

Will's face is carefully blank as he stares at Hannibal's chin, eyes refusing to lift another inch in order to make eye contact with Hannibal.

"Where else did the stag lead you in your past life?"

Will's voice is monotone as he says, "It followed me when I was sleepwalking, a black shadow behind me, its hooves ringing on the empty pavement. It walked next to Abigail's room while she was unconscious." Will's eyes finally move to stare at Hannibal when he says, "I hunted it in my dreams, and when I woke I threw up Abigail's ear. The stag morphed then, became a monster. It became you."

Those final words are a death knell. They ring in the silent room, echoing over and over inside of Hannibal's ears.

*Monster. Monster. Monster.*

Will had called him a monster before, but not like this. This is a verdict, a condemnation. An acknowledgment that something in Hannibal is so twisted and malformed that he cannot possibly be considered human anymore.

Hannibal's tongue is dry. He slides it over his bottom lip, sits up straighter in an attempt to stop the spinning inside of his head. "Do you still believe that? Do you still think I am a monster?"

Will slumps further into the chair and runs a tired hand over his eyes. He shakes his head, and Hannibal's world rights itself once more. "No. Neither of us are the same as we used to be. It was not your killing that bothered me, Hannibal. Discovering you were the Chesapeake Ripper hurt, not because of your murders, but because of your betrayal. You *lied* to me, Hannibal. Hurt me in ways I did not know a person could suffer and still survive. Though, I guess I didn't survive, did I?"

Hannibal notes that there are tears swimming in his vision, trapped behind his eyelids only through sheer force of will. He clears his throat and asks, "What can I do? How can I make this right."

Will stands and walks over to Hannibal. The fire behind him makes Will seem taller, larger. The shadows spread across his back and morph into a pair of black antlers. Will is ethereal, a god in human form come to wreak punishment on those it deems unworthy. "You make the past right every day by choosing me. That is all I can ask."

Hannibal nods. A single tear streaks down the side of his face. Will coos, leans down and licks up the tear. His tongue is hot against Hannibal's skin, warm and wet and utterly sinful. Hannibal shivers, immediately desolate when Will pulls away and all that is left is a stripe of cooling saliva on his skin.

"Please stay," Hannibal whispers.

Will stands up, looms over Hannibal once more. "Gideon is still out there, Hannibal. You need to keep yourself safe. Do you know where he will go next?"

“After fleeing custody, he strung up the organs of the officers in charge of his transportation. It wasn’t until a few days later that his next victim appeared.”

“Dr. Carruthers.”

“Yes.”

Will tilts his head back, hums. “This year has not been kind to Frederick Chilton. First one of the patients in his care dies, then one of his staff. Now another patient has gone missing.”

“And Frederick’s kidney and stomach will soon join the list of missing things.”

Will smirks, but his lips twist downwards rather than up. “Hopefully this is the worst thing that will ever happen to Frederick. I can’t stand him, but I also can’t imagine having to live through what he did. What could possibly be worse than watching while someone removes your own organs?”

Hannibal clears his throat, crosses one ankle over the other.

“Hannibal.”

Hannibal looks over at the fireplace, notes that the logs have burned down to charred stumps.

“Hannibal, what are you hiding?”

Sighing, Hannibal finally forces himself to look up and meet Will’s eyes. “I…may have plans for Chilton.”

“What sort of plans?”

“He is to become the Chesapeake Ripper. A fitting end after the confusion he caused Gideon to feel over his own identity.”

Will’s face is carefully blank as he asks, “I thought I was your scapegoat.”

“No. Your…incarceration was merely a tool to aid in your becoming. I never planned for you to stay in the BSHCI for long. You are far too valuable. After your release, Chilton would take the fall for everything.”

Will’s nostrils flare. His scent burns with anger, bright and sapid. “Of course. Valuable.” Will chews on his bottom lip, then asks, “How would you frame him? You had excellent practice with me. Months of psychic driving and manipulation, and all it took for me to break was a single ear.”

“Will, must we really discuss—”

“We must.”

Hannibal slumps his shoulders, just the tiniest amount. “Very well. I had planned on using Gideon.”

“Gideon? I shot him. He died.”

“No, Will. He survived and was placed back into the BSHCI to recover. It would be easy enough to remove Gideon, then plant his body in Chilton’s home. And…”

“And?”

Hannibal frowns, tries to see what emotions lurk beneath the surface of Will’s storm-tossed eyes, but the boy has learned to hide himself from Hannibal too well. “And I have been using psychic driving on Miriam Lass to convince her that Chilton is her captor. Years of sodium amytal and scopolamine, combined with recordings of Chilton’s voice, will allow Ms. Lass to identify Chilton by sound as soon as she is released.”

“Released? One arm short, I’m guessing. God, Hannibal, where are you keeping her? I didn’t see her in your basement. Unless there’s another murder basement I don’t know about?”

“I have a safe house along the coast. Abigail was kept there, after I removed her ear. I do wonder what became of her in our alternate timeline.”

Will takes a step back, tugs on the tips of his hair hard enough to pull a few curls loose. He winces at the pain, then drops the torn hair onto the rug, the individual stands glinting from the reflection of the fire, small arcs of glistening light like the streaks of a shooting star. “Jesus Christ. I can’t believe—I mean, Chilton is no saint, but I know what it feels like to be falsely accused.” Will begins pacing the study, walking from the fireplace to the harpsichord then back again with short, jerky strides. “Were you ever planning on telling me?”

“Not until I deemed it necessary.”

“*Necessary*,” Will sneers. His eyes are now lined with tears, and Hannibal’s heart breaks at the sight. He is hurting Will, hurting his beloved, and he has no idea how to make this right. “Whatever it takes to get what you want, right? Frame me. Frame Chilton. Kill anyone who gets in the way. Was that why you killed Georgia Madchen? She could have seen you when you framed her for Sutcliffe’s death? She was just a *child*. I can’t—” Will pauses, then turns to glare at Hannibal. “I have to go.”

“Will—”

“No, Hannibal. I need some space right now.”

Hannibal’s heart breaks again as he watches Will leave the room, listens to his heavy footsteps tread down the hallway. The front door closes with a whisper rather than a bang, and Hannibal desperately wishes Will had slammed it shut, had left Hannibal with something, anything, even if it was just the echo of a sound.

Hannibal isn’t sure how long he stays there, back still completely straight, his gaze locked onto the slowly dying fire. Several times he makes as if to get up and follow Will, only to sit back down. Will had asked for space, after all.

Hannibal can at least give him that, even if he cannot make Will happy.

“Hannibal?”

Abigail’s timid voice breaks him out of his reverie. He blinks, slowly, and stands. His knees pop loudly at the sudden movement, aching from the length of time he has been sitting in the same position.

“Apologies,” Hannibal says. He clears his throat. “Will had to leave. Perhaps you will see him another time.”

“I heard loud voices. Is everything…okay?”

Hannibal keeps his face carefully blank as he replies, “It will be. We had a disagreement, but it will resolve itself. I love Will.”

“I know you do. Sometimes it’s the things we most love that we can’t help but hurt.”

Hannibal looks at Abigail, the pale column of her throat, the wary caution in her eyes. She knows more than most just how cutting the edge of love can truly be.

“It will be fine,” Hannibal says. He grabs his glass of wine from off of the side table and takes it to the kitchen, downing the rest of the expensive drink with a quick swallow before washing the glass and setting it upside down in the rack to dry. He finishes the rest of his nightly routine in a sort of fog, his eyes unable to fix on any one particular thing. As he climbs into bed, he feels the other side of the empty mattress like a pillar of ice, an unreachable canyon that separates him from Will.

He sleeps poorly that night, and when he wakes, the first thing he does is try and call Will. The call goes to voicemail, and Hannibal frowns and leaves a message, asking (begging) Will for forgiveness and promising to not keep anything from his darling boy in the future.

Hannibal makes coffee for himself and Abigail, then drives to his office. He texts Will when he arrives, telling Will that he will be available at any time if Will wishes to talk.

Throughout the morning, Hannibal cannot stop from checking his phone. Each time, he is greeted with a blank screen, not a single text or missed call from Will.

By lunchtime, Hannibal is concerned.

Hannibal calls Beverly Katz of all people, unwilling to alert Jack of the…disagreement he and Will are currently experiencing.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Katz? This is Dr. Lecter. I was wondering if Jack had asked Will to look at any of the bodies pulled from Abel Gideon’s crime scene.” A lie. Hannibal does not care whether Jack has bothered Will about coming back to consult; Hannibal is much more concerned with whether Will showed up at the FBI Academy at all.

“No, thank goodness. Apparently his last conversation with Will didn’t end on good terms.”

Hannibal can relate to the sentiment.

“That is a relief to hear.”

“Yeah, I hope Will is enjoying the academy life. I haven’t seen him for a few weeks, but the last time I did he seemed so much happier.”

Hannibal’s heart sinks. If Beverly has not seen Will, that means he potentially did not go to work today. “I am glad that he seems happier. His mental wellbeing is of the utmost importance to me.”

“Good. It should be important to someone. It certainly isn’t a priority for Jack.”

Hannibal sighs and stares out one of the floor-to-ceiling windows in his office. “I couldn’t agree more. Thank you for your time, Ms. Katz.”

“It’s Beverly. And I am always happy to gossip.”

Hannibal lets out a half-hearted chuckle, then hangs up, more worried than ever. He quickly cancels his last appointment—citing another family emergency—then gets into his car. It’s a slow drive to the FBI Academy, the lunchtime traffic clogging up the roads throughout Baltimore. By the time Hannibal arrives, both of his hands ache from how hard they have been clenching the steering wheel.

Inside, Hannibal walks upstairs to find Will’s office empty, no sign of the boy. The tiny room reeks of old books and even older coffee. Hannibal frowns, then goes to Will’s classroom. It is empty as well, though there are a few confused students lingering near the doorway.

“Is everything alright?” Hannibal asks one of them, a girl nearly the same age and height as Abigail, though her hair is bleach blonde rather than brunette.

“No. Professor Graham never showed up. He didn’t email us, either. I know he sometimes consults on stuff, but he’s never canceled a class before without warning us or finding us a substitute.”

Another student huffs and rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I can’t complain too much about him skipping class today. That guy is a serious hard-ass.”

Hannibal internally seethes at her language, but he has much more important issues to worry about than a vexed student. “I see. Excuse me.” He walks down the hall and immediately pulls out his phone. He dials Will’s number again.

Again, no answer.

It seems it is finally time to call Jack.

The man picks up on the second ring. “Hello?” His voice is gruff, gravelly.

“Jack? Have you seen or heard from Will today?”

“No, Dr. Lecter. I promise I haven’t pulled him into the Gideon case, as much as it pains me to say.”

“I appreciate you respecting Will’s wishes, but I am worried about him. After he left my house last night, neither myself nor his students have seen him. He never appeared at the Academy. His students say he never warned them of his absence, either.”

Jack curses into the phone. Hannibal hears a clatter, then the sounds of fingertips on a keyboard. “Last night you say? What time?”

“Around nine in the evening. I have not been to Will’s home yet to see if he ever made it back.”

“Could you check? If not, I’ll send a team there instead.”

“No, let me go. He might be having a relapse. The symptoms of encephalitis can linger even years after treatment.” Hannibal’s chest tightens at the thought of Will, alone, wandering the woods behind his house while his mind blazes inside of his skull.

“Call me when you get there. I don’t like the timing of this. Gideon is still on the loose. There’s no telling who he might strike next.”

“Will was never a part of Gideon’s case,” Hannibal reminds Jack. “The man would have no motivation to seek out Will.”

“Ah, that’s not entirely true.”

Hannibal’s heart stops. Stutters. Fails to beat properly. His blood turns to ice inside of his veins. “What do you mean?”

“From what Dr. Chilton has told me, there was a rumor going around among the inmates at the BSHCI.”

“What sort of rumor?” Hannibal finally reaches his car. He yanks open the door and slides into his seat, pressing the pedal down as hard as he can until the Bentley is racing out of the parking lot and onto the highway.

“It all came from Tobias Budge. Apparently, before his death, he was under the impression that he had found the real Chesapeake Ripper.”

Hannibal’s hands are so slick with sweat that they slide off of the steering wheel as he turns. He curses under his breath, tightens his grip. “And who did he think the real Ripper was?” he asks, already knowing (dreading) the answer.

“Tobias thought that Will was the Chesapeake Ripper. And if Gideon believes that too, then Will is in danger.”

# Chapter Fourteen

Hannibal does not remember the drive to Will's house. He does not remember parking his Bentley. He does not remember opening his car door, nor stepping outside into the wet heat. He does, however, remember the inordinate relief he felt at seeing Will's blue Volvo tucked against the side of the house, covered in dust blown from the gravel driveway.

That means Will at least arrived home. Whether it is Gideon or the encephalitis which caused Will's disappearance, it will be a much easier task to track him now that Hannibal has a firm starting point.

Hannibal strides up the front steps and frowns at seeing the front door unlocked and slightly open. Each time the wind blows, the metal frame of the door bangs against the sill. Hannibal's heart also bangs inside of his chest, suddenly on high alert.

Instead of calling Will's name, Hannibal quietly opens the door the rest of the way and walks inside. His stealth is immediately compromised by the whining of seven dogs.

Hannibal winces as one jumps up to paw at his suit jacket. They reek of fear and dysbiosis from stress. Will's scent is everywhere in the air, the lingering remains of his stale sweat and the cheap alcohol-laced fume of his aftershave.

There is another scent, one Hannibal vaguely recognizes.

It's the scent of Abel Gideon: an altogether unpleasant mixture of blood, adrenaline, and the cheap shampoo used by all inmates at the BSHCI.

"*Šūdas*."

Hannibal's curse goes unnoticed. Will's dogs keep whining, and though Hannibal has no hope that Will is anywhere inside the house, he still goes through each and every room, desperate to discover that this is all some strange misunderstanding and Will is tucked away asleep on his bed or chair, cellphone dead, perhaps an empty bottle of whiskey at his side. But there is no sign of struggle, no trace of Will's blood on the floor downstairs. Will's bed (his mattress, more accurately) sitting in the middle of the living room is unmade, the sheets and pillows rumpled from where the dogs have been resting. Small tufts of fluffy hair sit like dollops of whipping cream on the unwashed bedding. There are no dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, no unopened packages of food on the table.

Frowning, Hannibal quickly goes upstairs, though these rooms are all similarly unremarkable. There is nothing to suggest Will was kidnapped. The only reason Hannibal knows that Will has been taken is because of Abel Gideon's scent.

Hannibal gets out his phone and calls Jack Crawford. He paces the living room as he speaks, unable to stand still (to let his mind wander to the very real possibility that Will is somewhere, trapped, hurting and unable to flee). "Jack, I believe that Will has been taken by Gideon. Will's car is in Wolf Trap, but he is not."

“Why do you think it’s Gideon?” Jack asks.

“As I have said before, I have a very keen sense of smell. I recognized Gideon’s scent inside of Will’s home as soon as I walked inside. The front door was partially opened as well, and the dogs are in distress. This at least narrows down the window of when Will went missing. It was between the time he arrived home last night, probably close to ten, and now.” Hannibal looks down at his watch, notes that it is now late in the afternoon. That leaves almost twenty-four hours unaccounted for.

“Fuck,” Jack says.

“I agree,” Hannibal replies blithely. His voice does not reveal the trembling in his hands, nor the stuttering of his heart. He is swimming in fear, drowning in anxiety that something has happened to his beloved. Hannibal has already lost Will once.

He refuses to lose him again.

“Where should we search?” Hannibal asks. He never left Miriam Lass’s arm in the observatory, so there is no reason Gideon would ever go there. Hannibal is worried at the unpredictability of Gideon; he has already veered away from the previous script. There are no guarantees now over what the escaped convict might do, no rules that Gideon is playing by. The man’s mind has been scrambled by Chilton’s vain attempt at infamy—his attempt to have the Ripper secure behind the walls of his hospital. Gideon does not know who he is; that makes him dangerous.

And if even a single hair of Will’s head is harmed, Hannibal will make sure Gideon pays for it ten times over.

“Wait there. I’ll come down with the rest of my team. Perhaps there’s been some evidence left behind that can be useful in our search. Try not to touch anything.”

Hannibal rolls his eyes at the unnecessary instruction. His heart is racing, begging him to run, to jump behind the wheel of his car and search for Will on every street in the state until he is found. But such thoughts are irrational: the best (and only) thing Hannibal can do now is wait for Jack and help the investigation in any way he can.

That does not mean he is happy about the situation.

“I await your arrival,” Hannibal says. He hangs up the phone, then lets Will’s pack of dogs out into the yard. They immediately spread out to use the restroom, meaning they have been inside for some time without relief. Hannibal begins creating a radius in his mind of how far Gideon and Will could have gone in the past twenty-four hours. The possibilities are near endless, and Hannibal is once more struck by how *helpless* he feels.

Less than thirty minutes later, Jack is pulling into Will’s gravel drive and leaping out of his vehicle with a rather impressive amount of grace considering the size of his body. Behind his car are several police SUVs, one of which carries Beverly Katz.

“Beverly,” Hannibal greets. She is certainly the most competent member of Jack’s team. If anyone can find something of use in Will’s home, it is her.

“Hannibal,” she replies. There are stress lines around her eyes, and her mouth is tilted downward as though slanted into a permanent frown. “I would say it’s nice to see you, but it isn’t really. Find anything?”

“Not in my initial sweep,” Hannibal replies. He follows Beverly through the front door, mindful of the swarm of dogs billowing around them like a fur-filled tornado. “The only thing out of the ordinary was the open door and Gideon’s scent in the living room.”

“No signs of struggle, then?” Beverly asks. She peers around the room, hands twitching at her sides.

“No,” Hannibal replies.

Jack and the rest of his team come barreling down the stairs. “Nothing upstairs that I can see,” Jack spits out. “What the hell did Gideon do to him? How did he manage to subdue Will without any blood or marks?”

“He must have surprised Will,” Hannibal postulates. “I cannot smell any drug. Chloroform leaves a distinctive trace, and even an injection could leave behind a scent. Gideon must have rendered Will unconscious some other way.”

For the next hour, Jack’s team and Hannibal throw around different ideas. Will is classified as a missing person, and his face is soon splashed on every website and TV station that Jack can think to alert.

Abigail calls, and Hannibal relays Will’s absence.

“Stay inside,” Hannibal commands her. “Do not go near the windows. Do not open the door for anyone, even if they claim to be the police. Until *I* tell you it is safe, do not assume the opposite is true.”

Hannibal is not losing another member of his family, not now that he finally has someone to protect. Someone to love.

A wave of guilt crashes into Hannibal, tugging him beneath a burning, restless flood of shame. Hannibal should have done *better*. He should have escorted Will home last night—better yet, Hannibal should not have allowed Will to leave at all. Hannibal should have called him back in order to tear down the walls that have been erected between them. He should have—

“I got it!”

Hannibal blinks, looks up to see Jimmy Price holding something purple in the tips of his tweezers, an ecstatic expression on his face.

“What do you have?” Jack huffs. His eyes are red-rimmed, tired from staring at Will’s home for such an extended period of time.

“*Lobelia canbyi*. Lovely perennial with a purple flower. Related to *Lobelia inflata*, which the locals used to call Indian Tobacco due to its similariti—”

“Get to the point, Price.” Jack growls. “Why do we care about this flower? Will lives next to a goddamn forest.”

Price shakes his head so hard he almost trips as he stumbles over to the kitchen table. He sets the crushed purple flower onto the table, the petals crumpled into a nearly unrecognizable ball, no doubt from being stepped on multiple times. “Now, see, that’s the thing. Canby’s Lobelia are endangered in Maryland. Hardly any left. There’s only a few spots where they can grow here. Trust me, I tried.” Price leans over to Hannibal and whispers, loudly enough for everyone to hear, “I wanted to grow some Indian Tobacco for my bees. I got the Canby’s Lobelia accidentally and wasted an entire month watering the bush until I realized that unless I *drowned* the thing, it wouldn’t grow.”

“Enough!” Jack shoots up from his chair and glares down his nose at Price. “So there’s a rare flower on the ground. You think it might have come from Gideon's clothing?”

“Perhaps,” Price murmurs. “I doubt that Will has been along the coast recently.”

“He has not,” Hannibal offers. “And neither have I. The only other person who enters the home is Will’s neighbor, but the last time he watched Will’s dogs was over a week ago.”

“Too long,” Price says. “The flower is still fresh. It must have gotten stuck inside the sole of Gideon’s shoe and then fallen out at some point during his visit.”

Hannibal’s mind is racing. He only knows of one thing that might catch Gideon’s attention along the coast: the house where Hannibal is currently keeping Miriam Lass. How Gideon even found the property is irrelevant at the moment. “Is there a map or chart that shows the plant’s natural territory?”

Price nods and plucks up one of the iPads spread out over the table. He removes his nitrile gloves, then taps on the screen for a moment before turning it to show Hannibal and Jack.

On the screen is a map of Maryland. There is only one part of the map highlighted in yellow to show where the plant grows.

And that area is right where Hannibal’s safe house is located.

“We must go,” Hannibal says. “This is the only evidence we have found since Will went missing. I do not want to waste another second. The longer we wait, the less chance we have of finding Will and Gideon.”

“Hold on,” Jack says. “Even *if* this flower leads us to Gideon, we still need to formulate a plan of attack. Gideon killed and lobotomized three guards while handcuffed in the back of an armored vehicle. He is not to be underestimated.”

“And,” Beverly adds, “this just shows where Gideon has been. Not necessarily where he will be going.”

Hannibal has no doubt in his mind that Gideon found Miriam Lass and is taking Will to the cliffs. Gideon is confused as to whether he is the Chesapeake Ripper; what better way to test that theory than taking another would-be Ripper and finding clues of the Ripper's past victims?

"Does the timing work?" Zeller asks, unimpressed with Price's discovery. "Would Gideon have time to drive to the coast, then drive back to kidnap Will, then drive out again?"

"It works," Jack admits, voice heavy. "It's an hour drive from Baltimore to the coast, then a two-hour drive to Wolf Trap. But why would Gideon go there at all?"

Hannibal swallows. Rolls his shoulders. How much can he reveal? How much should Jack Crawford know in order to go looking for Will without implicating Hannibal in the process? Should Hannibal care about his freedom when Will's life is currently hanging in the hands of fate?

"We should split up," Hannibal suggests. "The coast is far away; if the lead ends up being false, it would be best if some of the team were still here to explore other avenues."

Jack nods his head. "Yes, that seems good. Price, you were the one to find the damn thing. Want to head up the team that goes searching for this mystery flower?"

Price winces but reluctantly agrees. "Not sure how good I am in the field, Jack. I usually find the bodies *after* they've passed."

Jack's blank face says it all.

There may very well be bodies for Price to analyze when he arrives.

"I would like to go as well," Hannibal says, proud of how calm his voice sounds despite the utter opposite of calm surrounding every cell in his body. "I have medical training that might prove useful."

Jack tilts his head. Beverly stands and walks around the table so that she is a mere inch behind Hannibal's chair. "I'll go too. You should stay and pan out for other leads, Jack. This isn't just about Will. Gideon is dangerous for anyone to encounter."

Hannibal feels as though he is about to combust. There is a fire beneath his skin that licks along his veins and burns his lungs. He is tense, trembling, on the edge of ruin just from the very thought of Will alone and at Gideon's mercy.

If Hannibal does not leave soon, he does not guarantee that any other person in this house will ever leave, either.

"Fine," Jack sighs. "Go. Keep your phones on and keep one another in sight. I'm not losing another member of my team. Not today."

Hannibal is out of his chair before Jack finishes his sentence. He dons his suit jacket, then slides his phone into his pocket and runs out to the Bentley. He has enough gasoline to reach

the coastline, but no further. If Will is not there, Hannibal will have to waste precious time finding a station before continuing his search.

“Hannibal?”

Beverly is behind him, breath heaving, a gun holster strapped tightly to her hip.

“Yes?” he asks. His hand is on the door handle of the driver’s seat, knuckles white from clutching it so hard. He grits his teeth and forces a (reasonably) amicable look onto his face. “Is something the matter?”

“Besides your boyfriend potentially being kidnapped by a serial killer? No, not really.”

Hannibal huffs and slightly loosens his grip. “Yes, that does put a damper over my evening.”

“You shouldn’t drive alone. Price is taking over one of the other SUVs. Let me ride with you.”

A request phrased as a choice. Normally Hannibal would resent such a thing, but all he feels right then is relief. Beverly will help him find Will. Everything will turn out in the end.

It must.

Hannibal pulls out of Will’s gravel driveway and follows the dark SUV in front of him. They drive well above the speed limit, jerking around bends in the winding road as they creep nearer and nearer to the coast. The sun sets, paints the sky a red reminiscent of dripping blood. Beverly remains quiet for a few minutes before the tension apparently becomes too much, and she simply has to speak.

“We had a bet going, you know. How long it would take for you to ask out Will. Everyone could see you were absolutely smitten from the first meeting. I’ve only known Will for a few months, but he’s changed. He is so…free, now. Less anxious. I think we have you to thank for that.”

“Your thanks is appreciated, but unnecessary. Will is entirely the master of his own fate. He has worked hard to create his own happiness.”

Beverly regales Hannibal with some of her more sordid tales from when she trained at the FBI Academy. Hannibal relaxes, somewhat, as he allows the steady stream of her voice to pull him out of his own spiraling thoughts.

All the tension creeps up into his shoulders as soon as they cross the bridge over Kent Island. Hannibal’s safe house is along the coastline, a monument to his prowess as a predator. Hannibal has no need to hide when the sheep are all blind.

Hannibal curses his own hubris. Gideon was clearly not blind, not if he managed to find the house (and most likely what the house contains).

“Why here?” Beverly asks. She squints into the darkness, eyes tracing the road as Hannibal’s headlights cut through the invading black. There’s a distant flash of light, then a few seconds

later the low rumbling of accompanying thunder. “What would make Gideon want to bring the Chesapeake Ripper out here? If Gideon really believes Will to be the Ripper, this seems like such an odd location.”

Before Hannibal can respond, the SUV he has followed cuts sharply to the left. It drives down a short dirt path, then parks in front of a large copse of trees.

“Jimmy?” Beverly calls, jumping out from the car. “Where the hell are we?”

“The flowers grow in a ten-mile radius around this spot,” Price says. “We’ll spread out and search. Check from crushed stems or smashed petals.”

A German Shepherd in a blue vest exits the vehicle behind Price and begins immediately sniffing the nearest tree. “I thought we should start here. Daisy already knows Will’s scent; I brought one of his jackets with me in the van. Hopefully, if there’s a trail, Daisy will find it.”

The sky is suddenly illuminated, sizzling electricity lighting up the entire heavens, with only the briefest of pauses before thunder booms, so loud it shakes the very ground where they stand.

“Hurry!” someone shouts. A command given by a tall officer who guides Daisy’s leash with ease. The dog is spooked by the thunder. She tucks her brown tail in-between her legs and lets out a high-pitched whine. Her handler frowns and clicks his tongue in order to calm her.“We need to cover as much ground as possible before the rain comes.”

Hannibal immediately walks west, toward where his *safe* home (the word safe seems so mocking now, a taunt at Hannibal’s loss of control) is perched on the edge of a steep cliff. His leather oxfords are soon drenched in mud and dried leaves, but Hannibal pays it no mind, racing toward his destination with single-minded focus.

Behind him, Hannibal hears the rest of the search team spread out. Beverly shouts something, but her voice is lost to the billowing wind.

Their luck does not hold.

The heavens begin to weep.

There is no pause, no moment of calm before the storm. Hannibal is running toward the bluffs, squinting in darkness to try and guide himself in the right direction, and then he is slipping, tumbling to the ground as a torrential flood pummels the forest floor.

He hears another roll of thunder. Lightning pierces the air, illuminating a struggle in the distance. Hannibal squints against the endless rain and audibly gasps as what he sees.

Abel Gideon, dressed in a worn field jacket and soaked jeans, is grappling with Will against the base of a towering pine. His face is contorted into a snarl. One of his hands is wrapped around Will’s neck, the other is grasping at Will’s shoulder, palm sliding over the wet fabric.

Will is equally feral in his expression. His eyes are narrowed, locked on to each of Gideon’s movements. He twists away from Gideon’s grasp and slams his fist into the older man’s face.

Blood spurts into the air, black in the moonlight, and splashes onto Gideon's clothes. Hannibal smells it, relishes the warm, copper-laced scent.

Hannibal creeps behind a nearby tree and plans the best course of action. The element of surprise is working in his favor, as is the combined strength of both him and Will facing the aging (yet vicious) Abel Gideon. Hannibal has more strength, more practice in slaughtering sheep. Hannibal is quieter, stronger, faster. He is a monster, the shadow that slithers beneath the bed at night and consumes any and all in its past. He is—

He is utterly desperate in this moment, a curse and a blessing.

Should he wait? Should he reveal himself when both men are preoccupied or try to catch Will's attention in an attempt to formulate a plan? Should he—

There's a scream. More lightning. Will's face, contorted in agony, is revealed to Hannibal's devouring gaze. Black blood streams from a fresh knife wound, a long gouge that stretches from the corner of Will's mouth until it disappears beneath the collar of his shirt.

Without any forethought—without any thought at all save Will's piercing cry and the smell of coppery blood and the uncontrollable racing of his heart—Hannibal leaps from behind the tree and rushes at Gideon.

He manages to catch Gideon off guard. They both go tumbling to the forest floor below, Hannibal's strong arms clutched around the older man's waist as Gideon lets out a pained grunt from the sudden impact. With Gideon lying on his back, Hannibal begins to pummel him with his fists. Each connection of flesh against flesh is a revelation, and the air fills once more with the scent of fresh blood.

Gideon grunts and shifts his weight, and between one breath and the next, Gideon plunges his blade into Hannibal's side, right between his interchondral joints. The blade is too short to pierce his stomach, but Hannibal cannot be grateful, not with pain spearing through his side like a lance, with blood bubbling up from the open wound and pouring onto his already soaked shirt.

Hannibal hisses and pulls the knife from between his ribs, throws it to the ground.

"Han—" Will's voice is choked, cut-off.

Gideon breaks free of Hannibal's grip and shoves Hannibal to the side, fingers digging into the open wound on Hannibal's side. The pain is immediate and overwhelming.

Hannibal has felt worse.

This physical pain is nothing to the pain he felt seeing Will lift a gun to his head, seeing Will pull the trigger, seeing Will's beautiful body shattered and split upon the floor, entirely gone (and entirely Hannibal's fault).

All that matters now is keeping Will safe, even if it costs Hannibal his life. He is not the same monster he was all those months ago; he has morphed, shifted into a new monster, one that

lives solely for its beloved.

“Gideon,” Hannibal growls. He swiftly rises to his feet and clutches a hand over the stab wound in order to keep some of the blood inside. “Leave him. Your fight is with me.”

Giden laughs. Blood bubbles up from the corners of his lips, courtesy of Hannibal’s rough treatment. The older man’s nose is crooked in multiple places, and both of his eyes are ringed in various shades of black and purple. A flash of lightning illuminates the deranged smile that continues to stay firmly in place. “And here I thought my fight was with the Chesapeake Ripper. Sure, I could fight his boyfriend instead.”

Will is slumped against a nearby tree, but his face lifts when he realizes what Hannibal is attempting to do.

“Wait—”

“I *am* the Chesapeake Ripper,” Hannibal says, voice calm. Assured. “And you have made a grave mistake in laying your unworthy hands on Will. Do not worry; it is the last mistake you will ever make.”

Time seems to bend. Warp. One moment Hannibal is standing with a palm pressed to his side, the next he is rushing between Gideon and Will, desperate to keep the two separated. He grabs the knife from off the rain-soaked ground, blood and viscera causing the handle to slip in his hand.

Again, Gideon and Hannibal tumble to the ground. Will is shouting behind them, but Hannibal cannot make out the words, only the desperate sound of his voice. In the distance, more thunder, then the rise of howling dogs. The search team has caught his scent. If Hannibal wants to finish this, he must do it now.

“Touchy,” Gideon heaved, fist landing deep against Hannibal’s spleen.

Hannibal does not deign to reply, simply swipes the knife so that it catches Gideon’s forearm, a bright strip of red blooming beneath the man’s drenched jacket. Hannibal manages to pin Gideon to the base of a towering pine, the scent of sap and needles nearly overwhelming as Hannibal dodges Gideon’s wild punches while trying to find an opening to slide the knife across Gideon’s throat, once and for all.

Will comes stumbling towards them, clearly trying to help despite his pain, and Hannibal sees Will trip from the corner of his eye.

Gideon uses Hannibal’s distraction to headbutt Hannibal. He drops the slippery knife and grits his teeth as the world turns and tilts, vision blurry.

The dogs are growing closer. Will lets out a small whimper (an involuntary sound of pain that Hannibal knows belies a much greater agony roiling beneath). Thunder rumbles. Lightning flashes. The rain continues to pour.

Gideon lunges for the knife. He grabs it, spins to face Hannibal. Howling fills the air, from the search dogs, from Gideon. From Will.

Hannibal makes eye contact with Will, notes how even blood and silt cannot mar the boy's infinite beauty. Will opens his mouth, but Hannibal does not hear what he says. He grits his teeth, ignores the pain in his head, his side, his heart, and sinks his teeth into Gideon's throat.

In the end, Gideon dies not with a bang, but a whimper, his voice is nothing but a near-imperceptible gurgle as Hannibal's incisors dig through flesh and muscle until they reach bone. He tears his face back, watches with satisfaction as Gideon's blood spurts in a graceful arc from the open wound, warm and welcoming. Gideon's eyes widen before he slumps to the ground.

When Hannibal eventually forces himself to look at Will—afraid of what he might find, what horror or disgust he might see—he notes that Will is standing once more, though one of his ankles is twisted at an unnatural angle. The brief flashes of lightning provide enough illumination to make out twin tears tracks along either side of Will's face. The tears have cleared a path among the mud splattered on Will's cheeks. Two columns that allow Will's sun-kissed skin to shine through.

"Will…"

Will stumbles forward and wraps Hannibal in his arms.

"Don't you *ever* risk your life for me like that again, otherwise I'll kill you myself."

Hannibal shivers at the words (at the love and worship roiling beneath each spit syllable). "Of course, darling. None shall be my end save you."

Will pulls back and cups Hannibal's face with scarred palms. Hannibal leans down and presses a gentle kiss on Will's cut, lips stained red with blood when he pulls back.

"Hannibal! Will!" Beverly's voice is surprisingly loud among the commotion. She reaches the tree they are both sheltered under and immediately takes in Hannibal's mouth (his blood-soaked lips) as well as Gideon's corpse on the ground.

Hannibal is pleasantly surprised by the approval that shines in her eyes.

"I suppose that means Gideon is gone?"

"It would appear so," Hannibal murmurs, arms still wrapped around Will. Will's face is tucked into the crook of Hannibal's neck, cold nose pressed right against Hannibal's steady pulse. "I apologize for the mess."

"Don't," Beverly chokes out. She wipes at one of her eyes, then shoves her hand into her pocket. A dozen baying hounds come circling around them, whining and barking as they take in Will's scent. "Let's get you both home."

Hannibal and Will are led back to the clearing. Price is there, along with a medic who immediately ushers Will and Hannibal into the back of the van. Their wounds are patched up

on the drive to Baltimore. Jack calls, but Beverly refuses to let him interrogate either Hannibal or Will. Hannibal warms at her loyalty, at the way she so fiercely guards his beloved.

“How did your ankle become injured?” Hannibal asks. He traces a finger along Will’s temple, wipes away dried sweat and blood. If they were alone, Hannibal would suck the taste of Will’s pain from his fingertips. As it is, he borrows an alcohol pad from the medical kit near his feet and cleans his skin in a much more socially-acceptable manner.

“I tripped while running from Gideon. I…may have jumped from a moving vehicle at one point.”

Hannibal repressed the urge to bring Gideon back from the dead simply so he could kill him all over again.”

“Really, Hannibal, it doesn’t hurt. I am much more concerned with the stab wound in your stomach.”

Hannibal smiles, bemused, completely ignoring the FBI agent currently sewing a line of stitches along the bottom of his rib cage. “Fear not. It is a worthy injury. It brought you to me, after all.”

Will rolls his eyes, scent spiking with embarrassed pleasure. “You are such a sap.”

“Only for you, darling.”

Jack meets them at the hospital entrance. One of the nurses attempts to guide Hannibal into a wheelchair, and he only stops arguing with Hannibal when one of the other nurses explains who Hannibal is and how many years he spent as the hospital’s best surgeon.

“Sorry,” the man says, cheeks blazing pink.

“I believe Will would be better suited for such a device rather than me,” Hannibal replies, to which Will sends him a glare that would make lesser men quiver. Hannibal does not quiver, for he is no lesser man.

He is a monster.

And Will loves him just the same.

“Tell me again what happened,” Jack demands. They walk down the hall and into the ICU. Will and Hannibal refuse to part, and the doctors all roll their eyes but allow the two to share a hospital room.

“I went home last night around nine or ten,” Will explains. He sits on the edge of his hospital bed, draw sheet crinkling beneath his thighs. “Gideon was waiting for me. He had a gun and the keys to a stolen car. He kept saying I was the Ripper, then forced me to drive with him to Kent Island. I’m still not sure why he brought me there. Before we could go any further, I caught him off guard while he was making a turn and jumped out of the car. Then—”

“*Oh my god* what happened?”

Abigail bursts through the curtain dividers that served as the door to their hospital room. She is breathing heavily, and her ears are bright red, flushed with exertion.

“Abigail?” Will asks. “What are you—”

Will is interrupted by Abigail pulling him into a firm hug. Will winces at the movement, ankle jostling as Abigail holds him close, but his face quickly smoothes out into a look of utter contentment. “Hey, Abigail. I’m fine. Everyone is safe now.”

Abigail pulls back and self-consciously tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. She sees the line of stitches on Hannibal’s stomach and gently pats him on the shoulder. “Safe *now*? What the hell happened before now?”

“Will was just explaining that very thing,” Jack grumbles, though he looks more amused than annoyed.

“I see.” Abigail sits on a nearby chair and raises a single, dark brow. “Go on, then.”

Will huffs and turns to face Jack again. He finishes explaining how he ran into the woods to flee Gideon, got caught, then was found by Hannibal. He glosses over how exactly Gideon died; the body will speak for itself. For now, neither Hannibal nor Will wish to discuss the blood still staining Hannibal’s lips.

After an hour, Hannibal and Will are allowed to go home. Normally a wound such as Hannibal’s would require close monitoring, but Hannibal assures the staff—and Will—that he is perfectly capable of keeping the stitches clean and taking the medication prescribed to prevent infection.

The FBI had graciously allowed them to borrow an SUV until they arrived in Wolf Trap and had access to their own vehicles. Abigail joins them in the car, having taken a cab from Hannibal’s (their) home as soon as she heard Will had been found. She slides into the driver’s seat and firmly points to the back. “Neither of you are fit to drive,” she declares. “Doctor’s orders.”

“I am a doctor,” Hannibal says, no heat in his voice.

“So am I,” Will chimes in. “I have the certificate to prove it and everything.”

Abigail rolls her eyes at both of them and snaps her seatbelt into place. Hannibal is pleasantly surprised at how well she drives, noting how mindful she is when making a turn or changing lanes; she is careful to not jerk the wheel or jostle the two injured passengers currently slumped in the backseat.

Only a few minutes into their journey, Hannibal’s pain medicine sets in, and he is unable to do anything but look at Will with a love-sick expression and murmur Lithuanian poetry for the rest of the ride. Will attempts to talk to him several times, and Hannibal responds to each

attempt with more slurred love poems that tumble from his lips like smooth stones along a riverbed.

Once they reach Wolf Trap, Abigail guides Will to the porch first—Will grumbling about the bulky brace wrapped around his right ankle—then comes back for Hannibal. He is too far gone to be embarrassed at the way he leans against the slight girl. She is a foot shorter than him and nearly half his weight, yet she manages to help him up the porch steps and into the house without any other injuries being sustained.

Abigail helps them both to change into comfortable clothing, then goes upstairs to sleep in the guest bed Will had set up the week before. As soon as they are changed, Hannibal and Will collapse onto Will's bed, their bare feet warmed by the small fire currently blazing in the hearth. Will's dogs circle them like fur-covered sharks, happy to see their owner once more.

"*Aš tave labai myliu*," Hannibal slurs, pulling Will closer until the boy is pressed tightly against his uninjured side. "My darling angel."

"You are lucky that I convinced Abigail not to record this," Will replies, eyes flickering shut. He tries to yawn, but the stitches in his face pull tightly, forbidding movement. "The illustrious Doctor Lecter turns out to be a human like the rest of us."

"No," Hannibal says. "Not a human. A monster."

Will opens his eyes, stares into Hannibal with an intensity that is awe-inspiring considering the amount of drugs currently coursing through both of their veins. "Maybe you are," Will whispers. "But you are my monster, yes?"

"Yes," Hannibal breathes. "Yours. Always yours."

"Then perhaps being a monster is okay."

And Hannibal, for the first time in his life (in either of his lives) feels the truth of those words settle deep into the marrow of his bones. He is a monster. He is Will's.

And everything will be okay.

# Chapter Fifteen

“What are you doing?”

Hannibal pauses, sets the stack of paperwork he was holding back down into a cardboard box, the latex of his gloves sticking to the uppermost page. He quickly flicks his wrist to dislodge the paper. When he looks up at Will, he is unable to stop the downward turn of his mouth.

Will is supposed to be in bed, resting. Instead, he waits in the doorway of the office, pain etched into every line of his face as he holds tightly to the wood (a clutch for balance, Hannibal's replacement at the moment he supposes). The stitches from the knife wound tug and pull at Will's face, a red line that extends from the edge of Will's mouth down to his jaw.

“Darling, however will your ankle heal if you continue to abuse it so? I distinctly remember telling you to call me if you needed anything, even a tissue.”

Will raises a single eyebrow, unamused at Hannibal’s subtle deflection. “And here I thought you enjoyed when I used my brilliant mind to make my own decisions.” Each word is said with a grimace as the cut on Will’s face moves and pulls.

“Your mind is brilliant, yes, but also self-abusing. I want for you to heal. If not for yourself, then for me and Abigail.”

“Really? You’re going to pull that card? Fine.” With a loud huff, Will hobbles over to the nearest chair and collapses onto the seat, injured leg lying prone over the rounded armrest. The ball of his foot dangles in the air, the light from the fireplace glancing off the warm tan of his skin. “There. My ankle is resting. What are you doing?”

Hannibal frowns and closes the box, taping it both along the seam and then cross-wise, just to be thorough. “Packing.”

“Enlightening.”

“It really is nothing, Will. I am simply sorting out a few documents that need to be shredded.”

“Sensitive information?”

“Something like that, yes.” Hannibal does not offer anything further.

Will waits.

With a sigh, Hannibal sits down on the armchair across from Will, eyes staying firmly on the gentle slope of Will’s calf rather than straying up to the boy’s piercing gaze. “I did not wish to bring up the topic for fear of upsetting you. The last time we discussed it, you left here alone, and ended up kidnapped by Abel Gideon. Forgive me for not being eager to mention it again.”

“So the paperwork has something to do with framing Chilton, then?” Will purses his lips and rubs a hand over one of his tired eyes. His irises are as bright as ever, the cerulean not diminished by his fatigue in the slightest. “More trails that lead back to the Ripper?”

“Trails which must be destroyed,” Hannibal says, “as I am no longer framing another for my crimes. The Ripper will fade into obscurity like so many other killers before him.” Hannibal does not frown, does not change his tone from anything but its typical pleasant neutrality, yet Will immediately notices the deep-seated disquiet Hannibal cannot seem to cast away no matter how hard he tries to tighten the seams on his mask.

“No, Hannibal,” Will says in a soft voice. He lifts his leg off of the armchair and sets it back to the floor, now seated normally in the chair. “The Ripper could never fade. You have left an indelible mark on this earth. I am proud of you for trying to protect us, now that we have made something worth protecting. I…I love you.”

Hannibal sniffs. He allows a single tear to fall down his cheek, then pushes down the rest for later when he is alone (and Will is not looking at him as though he were a wounded puppy rather than a cannibalistic serial killer). The expression Will gives him is so unbearably fond that Hannibal can barely meet the boy’s eyes, scared that the love in his gaze will burn Hannibal and leave him nothing more than a pile of ash upon the floor, waiting to be swept away by the violence of Will's affection.

“And I, you.” A pause as Hannibal collects himself. He wipes the tear from his cheek, ignores the sharp pain that spikes beneath his ribs where his stitches lie in a neat row, all fourteen of them. Small tokens that Hannibal bears with pride, a symbol of his devotion to Will (a sacrifice in flesh to seal their bond). “I thank you for the praise, undeserved though it may be. For a short period of time, the mark I left behind was the shape of you, blood-soaked and broken upon the ground. I am infinitely grateful to be given a second opportunity to decide the legacy that ultimately I leave.”

Will hums, considering, and reaches forward to grab Hannibal’s hand inside of his own. Hannibal traces the scarring along Will’s palm, skin tingling from even this chaste contact. It never ceases to amaze Hannibal how reactive his body is to Will’s. How even a slight touch from Will sends Hannibal’s heart racing, his nervous system alight with a flurry of pleasure each time Will deigns to give Hannibal the slightest scrap of attention.

“What if…not all of the trails were destroyed?”

Hannibal finally looks up, forces himself to meet Will’s gaze head-on. “What do you mean?”

“Chilton is no saint. Nor is he a devil needing to be cast out of heaven for his sins. Still, there is nothing wrong with…dropping a few pieces of evidence to turn Jack’s gaze away from you. Throw him off the scent. I am no longer his bloodhound. It will be so much easier, now, to steer him away from any path that leads in your direction. And Chilton could use some time behind the bars of his own prison. You do love when your murders are soaked in a thick layer of irony."

Hannibal cannot believe what he is hearing. Will’s love already seems too great a gift to bear, something infinitely precious given to Hannibal while his hands are still dripping in blood.

For Will to not only accept that Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper—a murderer, a cannibal, a *man*—but to encourage more deceit in order to keep Hannibal safe?

Hannibal lunges from his chair and crushes Will back into his own seat. His lips are heavy, inelegant as they press against Will's. Hannibal licks deep into the boy's mouth and moans at the taste of Will, the velvet feel of his tongue sliding across Hannibal's, the sharp edges of his canines, the sudden heat of his pooling saliva. Hannibal's tongue traces first Will's upper lip, then the line of stitches trailing down the side of his face, each stitch a reminder of Will's love, his infinite capacity to know Hannibal and still *choose* him.

"Hannibal," Will moans, hands rising up to hold onto Hannibal's face. Will's palms are warm. Secure. Loving, as they trace the edges of Hannibal's jaw, then slide down to dig into his shoulders. "The files—"

"Will be destroyed," Hannibal growls. He nips at Will's bottom lip, then licks the delicate skin as if in apology. "Those plans are of the past. I have other, better means of manipulation at my disposal now. And I have you, my darling, wonderful boy. The part of myself I never realized was missing until it was found." Hannibal pauses, choking on the force of his emotions. "*He whom loves touches not walks in darkness*," he whispers, imaging Plato writing those words after finding his own other half.

Will's blush is deep. His scent spikes with arousal, with pleasure. With love.

"I don't mind walking in the darkness," Will whispers, "because I know I will find you there, waiting." Will grabs Hannibal's arms and pulls the man forward until Hannibal is sitting in Will's lap. Hannibal shifts, careful not to jostle Will's injured ankle. He cannot help but sink into Will's arms, gently rutting against Will's stomach as his erection leaks into his trousers and stains the fabric with precum.

"Let me help you," Will whispers. His warm breath blows across Hannibal's ear, sends a jolt of sensation down his spine. "You've been alone for too long, *cher*. Not anymore. Ripper or no Ripper, you are *mine*."

"Yours," Hannibal whispers back. He drops his forehead down so that it is resting against Will's. Their bodies are both subtly moving, shifting, rocking together in a back-and-forth that is as natural as the waves lapping upon a shore. Hannibal's pleasure builds and grows inside of him, a flame licking into his organs and searing them with heat.

There's a knock on the front door, and Will pulls back from Hannibal with a curse. Hannibal clears his throat, sits back to straighten his waistcoat, runs a delicate hand through his hair. It takes a tremendous amount of strength for Hannibal to stand, to peel himself away from Will.

Will, whose eyes are nearly black with arousal, feral in their intensity. His cheeks are a brilliant red, his curls tousled over his forehead, and his t-shirt is rucked up to reveal the toned skin of his abdomen. Even his hands are affected by his lust, palms clenching the armrests of the chair so hard that his knuckles have started turning white.

Stunning. Ethereal. Hannibal could think of a thousand different synonyms to describe Will's beauty and still none would come close to scratching the surface of Hannibal's complete and

total adoration of the boy.

Will clears his throat, obviously sensing Hannibal's ardent affection. Hannibal is sure that even a non-empath would be unable to ignore the sheer ferocity of Hannibal's emotions at the moment.

There's another knock on the door. Hannibal frowns, runs another careful hand through his hair, then walks out of the study and down the hall. Before his unwanted guest can knock a third time, Hannibal opens the front door with his spine ramrod straight, not a stitch out of place on his person suit. He forces himself not to squint at the sudden blinding light, keeping his body and all its instincts firmly under control.

"Hello," Jack Crawford greets. He peers around Hannibal's shoulder as if he expects Will to be lurking in the corner somewhere, simply waiting for Jack to appear and ask for his help.

"Agent Crawford," Hannibal replies, voice neutral yet bordering on cool. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I wanted to see Will. Make sure that his recovery is going smoothly."

"An admirable goal, yet a simple text would have sufficed to achieve it. Is there perhaps another reason behind your sudden visit?"

Huffing, Jack shoves his hands into the pocket of his black suit and stares at Hannibal without a shred of remorse or shame. "I suppose that is warranted. The truth is I…I wanted to apologize. I realize now that I should have protected Will once Gideon broke out from prison. As soon as Gideon heard the rumor that Will was the Chesapeake Ripper, there was a target on Will's back. One that I should have seen."

"Indeed." Hannibal says. He stares into Jack's brown eyes, searching for any deceit.

Ah, there it is.

Hannibal clears his throat and says, "I am hopeful that your impromptu visit does not come from a suspicious mind. A rumor does not a conviction make."

Jack's eyes narrow. He takes his hands back out of his pockets and crosses his arms in front of his broad chest, a juvenile attempt in intimidation. "And if it was? Rumors like that don't come from nothing. I brought Will into the BAU in order to catch the Ripper; it would be more than ironic if the Ripper turned out to be him all along."

"I do not appreciate your tone, Agent Crawford. You are chasing a glint of light in the tunnel of your investigation. But this is no more than a glint, I assure you. Will is not the Ripper. Until you have actual evidence of any wrongdoing, I suggest you leave the man alone as he recovers from his near-death experience."

Jack has the good sense to look somewhat ashamed. "I…very well. Good day, Dr. Lecter. Please give Will my regards."

As if.

With a short nod, Hannibal closes the front door. Instantly, his pupils dilate in order to compensate for the sudden lack of sunlight. The hallway, painted a deep indigo, is much more soothing for Hannibal to look at than Jack and his false contrition.

It seems as though Hannibal's plans to frame Chilton are needed more than ever before. He must protect Will at all costs.

And with Will's blessing, there is no reason for Hannibal to delay. He will release Miriam that very evening. Her psychic driving is more than ample evidence of Chilton's guilt. If Will is amenable, they can go together to the BSHCI to plant other evidence around Chilton's office. Hannibal pictures it being a romantic outing, culminating in Will ravishing Hannibal across Chilton's obnoxious oak desk.

"Hannibal?"

Hannibal turns to see Will stumbling down the hallway, his injured ankle skimming the floor as he hobbles on the other foot. His right hand is pressed firmly against the wall, a desperate attempt to keep him balanced.

"Will…" Hannibal sighs, unable to contain his smile. "Darling. What *am* I going to do with you?"

"I have a few ideas," Will purrs.

They do not make it to the bedroom.

No, Hannibal has Will against the wall, one arm securely around Will's waist in order to hold him up, the other expertly sliding Will's boxers and sweatpants to the floor, exposing Will's perfect bottom to the air.

"Stunning," Hannibal hisses into Will's ear. He palms one of Will's cheeks, lets the weight of it settle nicely into his hand. Will's skin is tan save for here, the contrast between pale and sun-kissed mesmerizing. Hannibal trails his fingertips over Will's pert cheek, then slips them into the seam where Will's fluttering hole waits, aching to be filled.

"Please," Will whines. He tosses his head back, searching blindly for a kiss. Hannibal is helpless but to obey, bending down to press his lips to Will's. He brings his hand up and allows Will to coat his fingers in saliva, Will's talented tongue laving over Hannibal's fingertips until they are dripping and wet.

Hannibal groans, slides his hand back down before inserting his pointer finger until Will's hole.

"Fuck," Will hisses. He bucks his hips forward, attempts to move away from the intrusion.

Hannibal does not allow him to move an inch. He tightens his arm around Will's wait and physically *yanks* the boy back and onto his finger, plunging up to the first knuckle in a single, swift thrust.

Will yowls at the sudden burn. Hannibal knows it is all for show, knows Will is capable of taking more, deeper, faster. Hannibal snarls and shoves his second finger into Will's opening alongside the first. He stretches them, allows Will some semblance of preparation. It will not be enough.

Hannibal does not think either of them care.

With a shaking hand, Hannibal slips out of Will and undoes the button on the front of his trousers. He keeps Will firmly in place as he guides his dripping shaft forward, forward, until the head is enveloped in Will's exquisite heat.

"*Darling*," Hannibal moans, unable to stop his short thrust forward. He is still mostly outside of Will, and the difference between Will's velvet-soft insides and the cool air of the hallways is nearly unbearable. "Please. Let me—"

"Yes," Will says, breathless. "Inside. All of it. I want you inside of me."

Hannibal bites at Will's earlobe and ignores the sharp pain in his abdomen as his stitches burst open. He ignores the sweat of his palms, the rapid beating of his heart, the smell of Will's arousal (lush and verdant) inside of his nose. He ignores everything but the tight rim around his cock, the way Will's body seems to suck him inside, kissing his shaft as if in thanks for finally filling him up.

By the time Hannibal is all the way seated inside of Will, he is trembling and shaking, barely able to keep himself and Will upright against the wall. Sweat drips from Hannibal's temples, lands on the collar of Will's shirt.

"*Move*," Will commands, though the effect is negated by the high-pitched whine in his voice. "Move, dammit, or I swear I'll—"

Will never does get to finish the threat.

Hannibal pulls back until only the head of his cock is still seated inside of Will's body, then plunges forward with as much strength as he is able in this position. Will's moan of ecstasy is worth every torn stitch, every drop of blood from the open wound beneath Hannibal's ribs, every sleepless night and anxiety-filled day. *Will* is worth everything, from the blade Hannibal placed beneath his chin to the knife from Gideon in his side. Every pain, every anguish, every uncertainty. Will is worth all of them and more.

"Will, you feel exquisite," Hannibal says. He rolls his hips, savors each sensation as it appears before him. "I love you. *Je vous aime*. *Aš tave myliu*. *Will*."

Will keens and claws at the wall. His hands leave sweaty fingerprints over the dark blue paint. He curves his spine, arches his back in order to get Hannibal deeper inside of him. Hannibal growls and bites down on Will's shoulder, thrusting harder and faster, unable to stop.

"Fill me," Will growls. "You've invaded me in every other way, poured yourself into my bones. I feel you even when I'm alone, hear your voice in my head even when you are not

there to speak. Please, Hannibal, *Hannibal* —"

With a low groan, Hannibal comes, flooding Will's tight passage with his seed. He continues thrusting his still-hard cock into Will until he feels Will reach orgasm. Will tosses his head back with a loud cry as he comes, painting the wall with sprays of creamy white. His hole tightens around Hannibal with each contraction of pleasure, and Hannibal has tears in his eyes from the overstimulation, the pain and pleasure merging seamlessly (as they so often do when he is around Will).

They both stay like that for a moment, catching their breath, until Hannibal slides out of Will. He watches with wonder as his seed trickles down Will's tan thigh, smearing into the fabric of his pants.

"Fuck," Will says. He tries to bend down to pull up his clothing, but Hannibal's arm is still tightly clenched around his waist.

"Allow me," Hannibal murmurs. He re-dresses Will, then himself. When both of them are no longer indecently exposed, Hannibal turns Will around and presses a gentle kiss to his lips, mindful of the stitches. "A bath, perhaps?"

"There's no time," Will says. He peers up at Hannibal, cerulean eyes bright, cheeks flushed, a light sheen of sweat covering his skin. "Abigail will be here soon, and she wants to help frame Chilton."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, takes a step back. "Does she now. Am I to assume, then, that you knew perfectly well what documents I was destroying when you stepped into my office? Pretended to give me permission to carry on with my deceit against Chilton despite giving Abigail the same permission already?"

Will's grin is far too beautiful to resist. How can Hannibal be upset when Will is everything he has ever wanted in a companion and more? Vengeful, intelligent, vicious.

Manipulative.

"Perhaps," Will drawls. He shuffles on his feet, wincing as he accidentally puts weight on his injured ankle.

Hannibal huffs—with pretend annoyance, of course, which Will knows full well—and wraps his arms around the perfectly insufferable boy. He carries Will up the stairs, the sound of Will's laughter trailing behind them like a silk ribbon, unspooling down the stairs and along the hall, a treasure Hannibal will keep with him always.

Will forces Hannibal to sit in order to tend to his broken stitches. Hannibal submits to Will's attention without complaint, always happy to have Will's hands on him in any way. His bandages are changed, the old thrown out, blood-soaked and torn.

They both changed, and Hannibal goes back downstairs to clean the wall. He has just washed his hands in the kitchen when he hears the sound of the front door opening. Hannibal dries his hands, then walks to meet Abigail. She is waiting for him in the foyer, nose wrinkled.

“It smells like sex,” she says.

Hannibal keeps his face perfectly blank, even as he checks the wall once more to make sure no traces of his or Will’s dalliance remain (there are none, loath as Hannibal was to wipe away the evidence of their passion).

“Do I dare ask how you know what such a thing smells like?” Hannibal replies, closing the door behind her.

“No,” Abigail says. “Is Will ready?”

“Ready for what, may I ask.” Hannibal says.

Abigail turns, faces Hannibal. Her blue eyes are similar to Will’s in color, but much more closed-off, like the shutter of a camera lens right before it snaps a picture. “Family bonding, I suppose. It seems all memories of family are splashed with red in my mind.”

“Red is the color of strength. Of love. Will the new memories you create also be colored the same way?”

Abigail gives him a shy smile. “I hope so.”

Will appears then, begrudgingly carrying a crutch under his arm in order to walk without hopping on one foot. “There you are. Any second thoughts? This is not mandatory, Abigail. I only want you to be happy.”

“And that is what makes you different,” Abigail says, voice much lighter. “It’s a nice change of pace.”

“As much as I appreciate the sentiment, I am still confused as to what, exactly, it is we are about to be doing.”

Will and Abigail share a look.

“Here,” Will says. He reaches into his pocket and hands Hannibal a familiar stack of paperwork. The one detailing his plans for Chilton, down to the most infinitesimal detail. The very paperwork he had just packed away this in order to destroy it. “I thought we might fulfill some of your ideas. Gideon might not be an option anymore to frame Chilton, but there is another sacrificial lamb that I feel none of use would mind sending to the slaughter.”

“Oh?” Hannibal caresses the edges of the crumpled paper, enamored with the idea of Will, sitting in bed while Hannibal slept, pouring over the notes that Hannibal spent so many painstaking hours to create. Pages and pages filled with blood and revenge, with irony and the sweet taste of flesh. “And who might that be?”

Abigail rolls her shoulders (a subconscious mimicry of Hannibal, and he preens at his influence over the young girl) and says, “Freddie Lounds. She and I will be meeting to talk later today. I gave her the address to an old playground that isn’t in use anymore. I told her that I heard she wanted to help me write a book in order to share my story."

“Little does she know that the ink will be written with blood,” Hannibal surmises. He smiles.

Freddie was right about one thing, it seemed.

The three of them *have* become their own murder family.

“It was Abigail’s idea,” Will says, pride evident in his voice.

“An impressive first tableau,” Hannibal says, unable (and unwilling) to keep the pride from his own mouth. “And one I would not share with any other.”

Together, the three of them load one of Hannibal’s more discrete vehicles with all of the supplies needed to finish their creation: a tarp, a syringe, Hannibal’s kill suit (as well as the matching suits he had made for Will and Abigail), a rather arrayed collection of weapons, a cooler, and a single piece of Chilton’s hair (stolen while Hannibal visited the BSHCI).

Once in the car, Hannibal drives close to the address Abigail gave him, careful to drop her off a half-mile away so that Freddie does not see them. Will gives Abigail a hug, whispers words of encouragement in her ear. She leaves with a spring in her step that is not forced in any way.

“She has blossomed,” Hannibal says. He turns to Will, tucks one of the boy’s riotous curls behind his ear. “Just as you have.”

Will rolls his eyes, but his cheeks still flush red from the praise. “Blossoms are weak. We haven’t bloomed; we have hardened. Solidified. Our impurities were burned away in the refiner's fire before being quenched in oil to form blades of steel.”

“And now you are all the stronger for it,” Hannibal murmurs. “May I be pierced by your blade until the end of my days.”

“Is there anything I say which doesn't turn into sex in your mind?” Will scoffs. The tips of his ears are now burning as well, the same cherry red as his face.

“I apologize, darling.”

“Liar.”

“Your liar.”

Before Will can respond, his phone lights up with a notification.

“It’s Abigail,” he confirms. “She is ready.”

Hannibal smiles, feels the wonderful racing of his heart. He pulls away from the tree they were parked beneath and heads over to the abandoned playground. There, in the corner, Freddie and Abigail are sitting at a worn park bench, faces shaded by the leaves of a flowering magnolia. Freddie is dressed in her typical outlandish fashion, a cheetah-print blouse and tight jeans. Hannibal wonders how anyone could ever miss such a striking figured

in a crown; the effect of her clothing on his eyes is akin to an icepick being shoved into his skull.

As soon as Hannibal stops the car, Abigail glances over. The sight of Will and Hannibal must give her the confidence she needs to reach across the table and push Freddie to the ground. Freddie shrieks at the sudden assualt and attempts to wriggle away, but Abigail has been hunting for years, and she is not one to let her prey escape so easily.

Will throws open the passenger door and hobbles to the trunk, grabbing his plastic suit and zipping it up before stumbling over to Abigail and Freddie. Hannibal puts on his own suit and follows behind at a leisurely pace, content to watch Will and Abigail (his family, his everything) finally show Ms. Lounds just how, exactly, they deal with the rude.

Freddie is rendered unconscious by Abigail's arm across her windpipe. As soon as her eyes roll back into her head, Hannibal lifts her body and carries it to his car, dumping it unceremoniously into his trunk. He sticks the syringe of etomidate into Freddie's neck to ensure she remains unconscious for the remainder of their drive, then slips back into the driver's seat.

The drive to Hannibal's home along the coast is much more pleasant this iteration. There is no frantic fear in his heart due to Will's disappearance, no worry that Will has been taken from him again. Instead, Abigail demands they listen to a radio station that seems to only play the worst rendition of country music Hannibal has ever had the displeasure of hearing. Fortunately, the music is drowned out by the sound of Will and Abigail arguing over the best way to eat french fries. It is a ridiculous argument, neither side making any sense (Hannibal would rather cut out his own tongue than dip a soggy slip of potato into an over pasteurized dairy confection). There is shouting, cursing, and the threat of tears.

Hannibal cannot seem to stop smiling.

Eventually, they reach the house along the cliffs where Miriam Lass is being kept.

"How did Gideon know about this place?" Abigail asks. They get out of the car and begin moving Freddie toward the clearing where Will fled the other week.

Will grunts as he carries the tarp and a large spear over to Freddie's unconscious body. "Matthew Brown. He was an orderly at the BSCHI," Will explains, noting Abigail's confused expression. "Hannibal told Matthew he could help him meet the Ripper, and Matthew grew suspicious and started tailing Hannibal after work. He followed Hannibal here one night, then told Tobias about it before killing him. Matthew wanted Tobias to know he was wrong about the Ripper's true identity, wanted Tobias to feel shame at his own naivety at being led astray by Hannibal before snuffing the light from Tobias's eyes. Gideon overheard Matthew describe this place and decided to see the house for himself. A possible connection to his missing identity. Chilton truly twisted Gideon's mind so badly that he believed himself to be the Ripper in the end."

Hannibal sighs and arranges Freddie's limp body so that she is laying over a fallen tree, hair gracefully flowing behind her head, a red beacon that will lead the FBI straight to Chilton. He turns to Will, helps him lay down the heavy spear. "I apologize again for my lack of

observation. If I had only paid more attention to who was following my footsteps, I could have spared you so much pain."

Will leans forward and kisses Hannibal's cheek, a soft brush of lips against warm skin. "I forgive you. It led us here, right? I am not afraid. Our fate cannot be taken from us. It is a gift."

"Did you just quote Dante, beloved?" Hannibal whispers. He breathes in Will's scent—petrichor, honeyed pleasure, the underlying hum of excitement that sings with blood and violence.

Abigail clears her throat. Loudly. "Where do you want the cooler?"

Hannibal kisses Will (just once, though he wishes to meld his body into Will's until they are so intertwined that there is no telling where one ends and the other begins), then grabs the scalpel from the pocket of his plastic suit. "Just there, Abigail. Are you ready to begin?"

Abigail nods. "Teach me." Her voice is confident, no trace of fear or doubt.

Hannibal smiles with pride. "Let us begin."

It is a simple thing, to wake Freddie. She screams as Hannibal cuts open her stomach, curses and pleas falling from her lips as easily as the lies she spun online. Hannibal shows Abigail the proper way to remove a liver, practically beaming once she lifts the proffered organ from Freddie and holds it in the air like a trophy.

"I did it!" she exclaims. Her hands are drenched in blood, as is the front of her plastic suit. Tidiness will come later, with practice.

"So you did," Hannibal says. He smiles at her, then at Will, who is staring at the two of them with soft eyes and softer lips. "And I could not be more proud."

Freddie is docile after that, blood-loss leaving her as weak-limbed as she is weak-minded. Once the liver is safely stored away for consumption, Will begins handing Abigail and Hannibal weapons. They are inserted into Freddie's body to mimic the Wound Man, the very victim Miriam Lass recognized in Hannibal's office all those years ago. Freddie's tableau is similarly striking to the original Wound Man illustration, the color of her hair nearly the same shade as the blood and viscera pouring from her body, her abdomen practically transluscent from how pale her skin is without blood pumping in its veins.

Once completed, the three of them stand around the finished tableau for a moment in silence, as if truly realizing for the first time the momentousness of the occasion. There is a solemnity in their bearing, as if they were mourners at a funeral rather than murderers. Hannibal supposes, though, that artists unveiling their creations to the world also look on such occasions with gravity and import, so perhaps their solemnity in this moment is not as far-fetched as it would seem.

Hannibal holds Will to his side, presses his nose into Will's hair to breathe him in, the very air in his lungs filled with his beloved (as Hannibal hopes it to be, always). "Shall we finish

our plans, then?"

Will nods, and the three of them pack up any stray items from around Freddie's corpse (making sure not a hint of evidence is left behind unless it was placed there with purpose) before going to grab Miriam. Hannibal brings her to wakefullness in the basement, keeping her system swimming with enough drugs that her memory cannot latch onto these moments. She will never remember Hannibal carrying her to the car, nor Will guiding her to the road only a few miles from the woods where Freddie's body remains in permanent repose.

She will, however, remember the man who pulled over to rescue her. She will remember the drive to the hospital, then Jack's rushed entrance into her room. She will remember being taken to Quantico for questioning, remember a flashing light and a man's solemn voice over a period of years that seem like days.

She will remember Frederick Chilton, and that is enough.

Freddie's body is found not long after Miriam is rescued; Jack sends a search team to try and discover where Miriam wandered from. They will not find Hannibal's house, but they will find a single strand of hair on Freddie's tableau.

That is enough.

While Chilton is being carted away in chains, Will and Hannibal are preparing the final touches to dinner. Will's seven dogs are each sitting next to the stove, tails wagging, more than one drop of drool landing on the wooden floor. Hannibal finishes the dish and shoos both Will (and his dogs) from the kitchen, citing the boy's injured ankle as an excuse to get him to sit (though in reality Hannibal simply needs a moment alone in order not to constantly burst out into tears of joy).

Hannibal forces his happiness down into a more palatable amount, then grabs the finished dish and carries it into the dining room.

"Seared *foie gras* with sage plum berry sauce," he announces with flourish. Will and Abigail, already seated at the table, give one another amused looks which Hannibal pointedly ignores. "Enjoy."

They each dig into the meal with relish, though Hannibal waits until both Abigail and Will have taken a bite before lifting his own fork. Never has a dish tasted sweeter than this, the flavor of victory sitting heavy on his tongue as he swallows each bite.

After, Will joins Hannibal on the couch in his study, Abigail sitting in one of the armchairs to their right. The dogs sprawl along the floor in various stages of repose, Winston sitting as close to Will as possible without actually climbing onto the furniture, Buster ending up tucked into Abigail's lap. She pets him absentmindedly as she pulls up the news on her phone and shows Hannibal and Will the latest headline.

*CHESAPEAKE RIPPER CAUGHT. JOURNALIST FREDDIE LOUNDS HIS LAST VICTIM. LOST FBI TRAINEE FOUND WANDERING THE STREETS.*

“And so it ends,” Hannibal murmurs.

“Begins,” Will corrects. He lays his head on Hannibal’s shoulder, the weight of him a comforting balm on Hannibal’s soul. “We are just beginning, after all.”

Hannibal nods his head, grabs one of Will’s hands and brings it into his lap. He traces the scar along Will’s palm, the raised line where someone had tried (and failed) to take Will from him. “You are right as always, beloved.”

“See,” Will teases, pointing his free hand at Abigail, “*that* is how you stay in love.”

Abigail rolls her eyes at them, though she is clearly pleased at their open affection. Perhaps because it means a more stable future for her. Perhaps because she cares for them, in her own way. Hannibal is content with either; after all, this is only the beginning of their family, as Will so eloquently put.

Outside, a distant rumble of thunder meanders across the rapidly darkening sky.The sound of pouring rain floods the room like a lullaby. The black clouds only serve to make their small sanctuary indoors more comforting. Hannibal holds to Will, holds to this dream that sprouted roots and became reality, and wonders if Mischa would be proud of who he has become.

Will, noticing Hannibal’s shift in mood, lifts his head to look him in the eye. He smiles at Hannibal, soft and sweet, and Hannibal thinks for a moment of how the future looks bright, like the glinting edges of a teacup brought together once more.

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